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Binding**















## AIR ADVENTURE

*by the same author*

A D V E N T U R E S   I N   A R A B I A

*Published also in England and in Dutch, French, Hungarian,  
Swedish, and Arabic.*

T H E   M A G I C   I S L A N D

*Published also in England and in Czech, French, German,  
Italian, Spanish, and Swedish.*

J U N G L E   W A Y S

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Italian, and Swedish.*





*Wide World Photo*

CAPTAIN WAUTHIER PAINTING "PARIS-TIMBUCTOO" ON HIS "TAXI"  
AFTER SAFE ARRIVAL

# AIR ADVENTURE

PARIS - SAHARA - TIMBUCTOO

BY WILLIAM B. SEABROOK

*Photographs by the Author*



HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY

NEW YORK



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## ILLUSTRATIONS

CAPTAIN WAUTHIER	<i>frontispiece</i>
BORDJ ESTIENNE	26
CAPTAIN WAUTHIER, SENDING RADIO	27
THE GAS PUMP AT BIDON CINQ	27
TYING DOWN THE WINGS WITH SANDBAGS	38
THE CENTRAL MARKET, TIMBUCTOO	39
CONFERENCE WITH PÈRE YAKOUBA	60
SALAMA, WIFE OF PÈRE YAKOUBA	61
DOOR OF RÉNÉ CAILLÉ'S HOUSE	61
STREET IN TIMBUCTOO	68
CROCODILE HUNTING	69
A DESERT AQUEDUCT	106
GEORGE ESTIENNE AND SEABROOK EXPLORING A WELL	106
CORPORAL DENIS	107
AN ANCIENT PRE-MOSLEM CHÂTEAU-FORT	118
DETAIL OF THE CHÂTEAU-FORT	119
SEABROOK, MARJORIE WORTHINGTON, AND PILOTS	190
AIR VIEWS OF DESERT AND RIVER FORMATIONS	191

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CORPORAL DENIS	107
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DETAIL OF THE CHÂTEAU-FORT	119
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AIR VIEWS OF DESERT AND RIVER FORMATIONS	191



## PART ONE



## I

IT WAS only when the sandstorm rose up from the Great Sahara, ripped us down out of the pretty sky, and taught us that it could make skeletons out of airplanes as easily as camels, that we really began to get acquainted with the desert, or to take it or ourselves seriously.

In fact the whole adventure had been cooked up so casually, so suddenly, and had moved so quickly in time and space, that it had been impossible from the first, for me at least, to focus on its reality.

I had been in Paris earnestly engaged in making plans toward an objective which had no remote concern with airplanes, deserts, or Africa. One day a cablegram came from New York to upset them. This cablegram insisted that I go immediately to see a man in Timbuctoo. Having once before visited Timbuctoo on a donkey, and being now in somewhat of a hurry, it occurred to me that this time it might be more agreeable to fly there. Paul Morand, who had godfathered me in other adventures, was out of town, but I managed to reach by telephone another good French friend, who promised to see what



could be done about it. Katie, for once, was even further away than Paul Morand; she was already heading, on an adventure of her own, for the high mountains of Mexico.

The unnamed French friend, I should explain, lest readers soon suspect I have embarked on another story of sorcery or magic, was a personage close to the Air Ministry. So the very next evening—it did look like magic—we found ourselves dining at the Coupole in Montparnasse with a young gentleman so resplendent in gold stripes, gold wings, and multicolored decorations that head waiters and sommeliers came scurrying, bowing, from all directions. His breast inspired confidence. It looked like a rainbow. He was Flight Captain René Wauthier of the French Army. I learned—though not from him, for he was of a retiring modesty and quietness which made his ribbons all the more impressive—that while too young to have served in the World War, he had seen distinguished service in Indo-China, Syria, Africa, and other colonies. He was small, delicately structured, almost girl-like without being in the slightest degree effeminate, with a gentle, deprecating smile that was at the same time cynically sly, distant, and engaging.

Present also at this first meeting was Marjorie Worthington, young American novelist who had collaborated with me on former work, and who chanced to be in

Paris. She had promised tentatively to join the expedition.

Details were arranged and clinched that very evening. The French friend higher up had known exactly what he was doing in bringing us together. Captain Wauthier, who just now had a forty-day leave of absence, and who had already made a notable Trans-Saharan-Lake Tchad flight two years before, disposed of some private means, possessed a Farman-Lorraine enclosed four-seater of his own, was planning to spend his vacation if possible in further desert flying, and was looking for some one to share the expenses and adventure.

It was all as simple as that. And it moved with amazing rapidity—for three days later we were actually in the air.

That is to say, we were in the sky but we were also glass-aluminum-enclosed in the long narrow body of an airplane so scientifically built and so beautifully equipped that while permitting perfect visibility for both pilot and passengers, it was almost as comfortable as the cabin of a small but expensive speed-yacht or the compartment of a de-luxe Riviera express train. Our Capitaine sat forward at his steering wheel, Marjorie sat at the back in a cushioned wicker armchair, while I gravitated between a similar armchair beside hers and a monkey-seat forward beside the pilot. A reserve gasoline tank at the left, arranged like a wall seat, and leaving

a narrow aisle forward, made a convenient table just in front of Marjorie. On it were strewn maps, novels, Marjorie's vanity case and handbag, all the casual appurtenances of spoiled tourists—except matches and cigarettes. At her feet was a thermos bottle of hot coffee. She could conveniently powder her nose. We were glass-enclosed like hothouse orchids and almost as luxurious. We were a mile high, and the fair fields, forests, rivers, and cities of France were sliding under us with seeming languid slowness though really at about one hundred and twenty miles an hour—but it was all so comfortable, so easy, smooth, that it failed to convey any hard consciousness of reality.

For the sake of a sort of reality, and for those who may care to be briefly informed on technical details, our machine was a silver-and-white Farman 190 monoplane, with a wing spread of forty-five feet, a tapering limousine body slightly longer, equipped with a Lorraine 240 C.V. motor. Its net weight empty was 2,200 pounds. Its three gas tanks, one in each wing and the reserve tank in the cabin, had a capacity of 900 pounds of gas, and the oil capacity was 100 pounds. When filled with gas and oil the plane weighed therefore 3,200 pounds, and with three passengers added it weighed approximately 3,600 pounds. Since the total maximum flying weight overall for perfect performance was 3,800 pounds, this left us only a narrow margin of 200 pounds for tools,

water, provisions, personal luggage—everything. So that while the total maximum ran toward tons, we had found ourselves carefully weighing and counting ounces before embarking. We had discarded ordinary suitcases, already fairly light, to buy lighter fiber ones, had debated for hours about the portable typewriter, had even considered whether we'd wear boots or lightweight shoes. Our Capitaine wore patent-leather pumps, but finally permitted me to keep my army boots because they had once brought me good luck in Liberia. On the other hand, he had ruthlessly suppressed certain toilet objects and bottles which Marjorie regarded as essential. Ultimate choices between objects weighing but an ounce or two individually had been fun, though a bit of a bother.

But once in the air, all that was forgotten. We floated inside a glass-aluminum magical cage which weighed nothing at all while the earth slid along far down beneath us, and concerned us no more than if we had been birds, or angels, or people flying in a dream.

We dropped down for a moment on the landing-field at Poitiers, Diana's town, to leave our parachutes—a vast green lawn, dotted with white moving specks which turned out to be snow-white chickens and a small white dog, all scurrying for cover. We taxied after them as if in pursuit toward the house of the guardian, which seemed a farm in miniature beside the hangar. The guardian, named Coyaux, was precisely a grizzled, ruddy-

cheeked ex-farmer—this was one of the few nonmilitary fields at which we touched—and the wife who came waddling after him to greet and embrace our Capitaine was an old-fashioned woodcut out of Rabelais with big woolen cap and medieval fur-tippet. We were stopping there only a moment, for the matter of the parachutes. What we were doing was irregular but normal. The government rules require parachutes, but they make no sense in a closed plane with three people flying, any more than they would make sense strapped to the backs of all the passengers in the big Paris-London aerial busses. If our plane caught fire or smashed a wing, one person might conceivably get clear, but three never could. Besides, they were cumbersome and uncomfortable. So we had strapped them on in accordance with public regulations, and had been photographed in them, and were now dumping them privately to be picked up dutifully on our return. When Madame Coyaux saw that we had a woman aboard, and learned that Wauthier was headed again for the Sahara, she clucked as loudly as any of her hens. "But is Madame not afraid?" she demanded over and over again. She didn't mean, it turned out, as she continued clucking maternally, afraid of anything connected with flying. Airplanes to her were safe and normal. She had even been up herself. But the Sahara, peopled with serpents, crocodiles, lions, and savage tribes! Wauthier

did what he could to reassure her, and she promised to pray for us.

Soon she was a black speck far down below on a green lawn, still waving bon voyage with her apron, with tinier white specks scurrying around her.

With that first landing and subsequent take-off, I began to guess at a second reason why, for us two passengers at least, the début of this Paris-Timbuctoo flight, which had been exciting to talk about and had seemed adventurous, was somehow unreal, dreamlike, lacking in hard reality. It was that our captain-pilot flew not merely expertly—he flew with the delicate touch and perfect ease of the pilot born, as some people are born violinists, poets, chess-players, or cooks. On our return to Paris, lunching all of us one day with Rivière, director of the Natural History Museum, Rivière whispered to me, “Do you know, he has the skull formation of a baby eagle!” I believe in creative evolution. I believe that nature breeds new types to keep pace with new discoveries and new ways of life. “Already a flyer in his mother’s womb.” I assert that pilots, the great ones, the long-flight adventurers, are a new race. Incidentally, to tell the whole truth as I see it about them, after talking sometimes half the night, dining, drinking, on a dozen different air fields, with a score or more of Wauthier’s famous or later-perhaps-to-be-famous, world-flung, winged companions of the air, I think that all the real ones of this new race,

like cooks and poets, are God-touched, that is to say, just a little bit beautifully crazy.

On that first day we dropped to earth a second time, for gas and sandwiches, at Toulouse. But what a contrast to Mother Coyaux and her white hens on the deserted lawn at Poitiers! Here we landed on the air field of the French Aero-Postal, with its concrete runways swarming like the docks of a great seaport with trucks, motorcars, men in overalls, its half-mile of enormous hangars, its mighty, heavy-duty monsters of the air, aerial locomotives, winged leviathans which transport not merely bags of mail but tons of it from far-off Patagonia and Chili up to Buenos Aires, and then from Central Africa, up along the West Coast, via Dakar, Casablanca, and over Spain, to this monstrous central depot in France, when it is redistributed through Europe. It has cost human lives and millions, but it is worth it. While we in America can justly claim not only Wilbur and Orville Wright as practical inventors of the airplane, but also aviation's two and perhaps three outstanding individual immortal pioneers in Lindbergh, Byrd, and Amelia Earhart, the French Aero-Postal stands today as one of the world's greatest monuments of organized, sustained, long-distance flying. There has been no other organized flying so dangerous, so adventurous, so epic as theirs since the World War.

We had a tiny adventure—or rather a diversion—of

our own, crossing the snow-capped Pyrenees at an altitude of 7,000 feet into Spain. With peaks, crags seemingly at our elbows, and gorgelike valleys between, which seemed to go down into the bowels of the earth, we struck a so-called air pocket. The plane, which had been a lovely, soaring bird with us inside it, or a magical cage, if you like, suddenly tipped sideways, became a dead weight, and began falling like a bullet. It fell through a seeming vacuum for seconds which seemed like the long part of a minute, and which Wauthier later told us represented a vertical straight drop of six or seven hundred feet, then caught itself as if it had struck invisible soft cushions, and was immediately on its steady, safe, level course again. While I make no pretensions to courage, this phenomenon did not disturb me unduly. With Captain Pressly, head of the American Marine air squadron in Haiti, I had flown considerably over mountain gorges, and knew from experience how normal, and how harmless, these sudden bullet-drops in so-called air pockets really are. Likewise, and even more naturally, it didn't disturb Wauthier at all. He turned and smiled at us over his shoulder, as if to say, "Well, that was quite a bump, wasn't it?" I wouldn't now be including the incident at all, except for this:

Weeks later, after we had been through real danger, including the sandstorm, Marjorie Worthington, who had never before been up in an airplane, said:



"You know, I thought it was all over—that is, everything over—when we took that drop going into Spain. How long were we falling? Just a few seconds? My mind must have raced. I thought first—maybe natural, maybe vanity—'How stupid, how unlucky! Paris-Timbuctoo! All our friends know about it, even the newspapers. And now we smash before we've even started. Almost before we've left France.' Then I thought, 'I wonder if it'll hurt. Or will I be unconscious before we hit the ground? Poor Willie and the Capitaine! They'll be killed too. Will anybody see us falling? Will they find us right away—or later? Will we be smashed all flat or messed up, or will being inside protect us from that?' And then I wished I had done a lot of things before starting that I hadn't done, and thought how sad my mamma and my sister Della would be . . . and it took me a little time to get readjusted and start life all over again when I found that nothing at all had really happened."

We were crossing into Spain to drop down at Carthage on the Mediterranean coast, where there is a good military air field, planning to spend the night there, and fly directly across to Oran in Africa on the following morning.

The only difference between flying over Spain and flying over France was that every city or important town

which now slid beneath us had on its outskirts an enormous symmetrical saucer which puzzled me until I realized they were bull rings, bull-fight arenas.

At Carthage, despite riots and revolutions, we were graciously entertained by officers of the no-longer-Royal flying corps. We saw a hound with two noses, learned that the Spanish name for beer was *cerveza* and that Spanish cigarettes are the worst in the entire world.

At the crack of a calm and cloudless dawn we lifted from the air field, which is on the water's edge, heading almost due south by the compass to cross the Mediterranean into Africa. Flying over the sea in fair weather is monotonous, so I went forward to the monkey-seat beside the Capitaine to watch him and the needles on the dashboard. It was like an automobile dashboard except that there were more clock faces, gauges, needles, showing altitude, speed, motor heat, oil, gas, and what not. The compass was in a box screwed to the floor. Capitaine sat in a small but comfortable aluminum armchair, with an elegant leather cushion under his tail, at a steering wheel much like that of a motor car except that the stick was movable. The gas throttle was not attached to the wheel or underfoot, but fixed to the fuselage at his left. His feet rested lightly on pedals controlling wires to the rudder. There was a clock, too, on the dashboard, but of course, like all dashboard clocks, land or air, it had stopped at half-past four. So he had a wrist watch fastened with a

rubber band to the writing-pad strapped on his right knee. I discovered, watching him, and he confirmed it afterward, that handling an airplane on level keel in perfectly calm weather is easier, simpler, and more natural than driving an auto. You just sit there lightly balancing yourself and the plane with the same natural instinctive movements as if you were coasting on a bicycle. When things get rough, the movements are still theoretically the same, but you jockey, fight, and strain with arms and legs as violently as if struggling on the back of a crazy runaway horse which is trying to commit suicide on a steep mountainside in the dark.

Just now all was calm and lazy, except, of course, for the roar of the motor. I have forgotten to tell about the noise. That's because you soon get used to it and forget it. Just the same you regularly stuff cotton in your ears. By putting your lips against the ear of a person you can be heard, but with difficulty, and it is easier, simpler, to scribble on a pad. As for vibration, there was practically none, much less, at any rate, than in a railroad train or motor car.

We passed no boats. The sea, some mile below us, was calm desolation. About an hour away from the Spanish coast we sighted straight ahead of us a thick cloud-bank, a floating ceiling of clouds, at about the same height we were flying. Beneath this ceiling all was gray calm, and above was glory of sunshine. With a mile margin be-

tween water and clouds, Wauthier decided to ride for a while under them. So we slid forward under the ceiling from sunshine into grayness, threatening rain. However, as we flew on, the ceiling of clouds grew lower and lower, until to keep out of them we were down skimming over the waves at an altitude of not more than five or six hundred feet. "*Tant pis*" ("So much the worse"), scribbled Wauthier nonchalantly on his pad for me, pulled back his stick, opened wide the throttle, and with a great increased roar we started to climb at a steep angle up through the clouds. Soon we were totally enveloped by them, in fog-mist so thick and all-inclosing that neither sea, sun, nor sky existed. Then suddenly we shot through yellow haze to blinding sunlight, and rising a little higher, were now riding level above a new and different sea of bright white fleece.

Presently, far distant southward, but off to our right, sticking up out of this white fleece, we saw what seemed to be glittering icebergs. They were the peaks of the high Atlas—really ice—our first queer sight of Africa. Twenty minutes later the clouds beneath us dissolved and the whole African coast appeared, rolling green hills and mighty mountains, brilliant in the sunshine. Furthermore, our Capitaine, by skill, luck, compass, and calm weather, had hit the mark like an arrow. Straight ahead of us, now almost under us, in its lovely bay teeming with ships, was the Algerian metropolis of Oran. It

looked like a French coast and a French city—which it was. It looked like the Riviera. It was almost as lovely as Toulon.

The air field, military and civil, with its big Oran Aero Club, was just behind the city. Here, since we were not out for speed records, we could spend a day and night for thorough inspection of our motor, taking on final supplies, etc., before starting on our real flight across the Sahara.

Carthagenia had signaled our take-off by wireless, and there had been various other dispatches, military and in the newspapers. Wauthier was a popular fellow. In consequence, when we landed and taxied up to the Aero Club hangar, there were Colonel Martin, head of the local military squadron, officials of the club, and other notables, to embrace and congratulate our Capitaine. These notables included another devoted friend of Wauthier's, a droll fellow named Gilotte who spoke Arab like a sheik, and who had lived so long among the Arabs that while now an important business man in Oran he had retained the old Arab conception of hospitality. His motor car, his clubs, his house, his dogs, his horses—all were ours. If we had accepted half he wanted to do for us or give us, we'd never have reached Timbuctoo, nor ever returned to Paris. As it was, we had a crowded day and night—and two adventures in Oran which concerned, separately, a lion and a lady.

The lion, the only loose one I have ever seen in Africa, was a magnificent beast of papier-mâché, life-size, with glass eyes and a superb mane of grass, the property of a peanut-candy vender, mounted on a pedestal above his wares to attract clients. This lion was so grand that, following the custom of all our best explorers, I wished immediately to photograph our Capitaine and Marjorie in its company. The peanut-vender—I think he was a Syrian Jew—got in front of my camera protesting volubly and aggressively that I would have to pay him first for the privilege. Fortunately Gilotte was with us. This Gilotte, as well as being the most generous soul alive, was a savage fellow. In a stream of obscene and profane Arabic, he explained that unless the peddler got out of the way and begged our pardon he would smash both lion and peanut stand to bits and afterward have the owner thrown into prison. "He was trying to rob you!" said Gilotte, still outraged. "You Christians say, 'Love them that despitefully use you; forgive your enemies.' The Jews say, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But we have an Arab proverb which says, 'If a man harms one tooth in my head, I'll have his whole god-damned mouthful!'"

Our adventure with the lady of Oran was of a milder sort. She was the representative of the leading local daily. She came to interview us while we were having dinner. She was pretty and Wauthier flirted with her a little, but she insisted on taking us seriously. She wanted to

know the nature, name and object of our *mission*. She wanted to present us in a serious, official, and important aspect. Her questions were embarrassing because we hadn't given our *mission* any official name. In fact, strictly speaking we were not a *mission*, which is an over-worked French newspaper word for any expedition more or less subsidized by army, government, or some big scientific society. While we had all official sanctions, we ourselves were not official. I was simply a fellow who had to go and see a man in Timbuctoo, and Wauthier, for all his gold wings and braid and medal, was a pilot who had chosen to spend his vacation flying—like a sailor who gets a day off and spends it in a rowboat. But she was a nice girl and we had to tell her something. I left it to Wauthier. A mound of shrimp shells on the plate in front of us inspired him. The shrimps at Oran are a local specialty and pride. They are freaks of nature, gigantic, big as baby lobsters, and delicious. Wauthier said: "We are engaged in a scientific, ethno-photo-oceano-geographic expedition for the comparative study of shrimp in African waters, including the shrimp of Oran, the wells of the Sahara, Lake Tchad, and the river Niger. We are going to do a book about it afterwards." This information with various pseudo-scientific comments in praise of the local variety was duly jotted down, and subsequently appeared in print, I am told, to the vast delight of Gilotte and the pride of the good people of Oran.

An army mechanic, friend of Wauthier's—he was a serious fellow with red hair and horn-rimmed spectacles—worked all night on our plane, tuning, checking, making ready.

We were awakened at four in the morning by him and Gilotte, and drove with them in darkness to the air field. Gilotte had bought our reserve provisions, canned goods, tongue, corned beef and what not, sufficient in a breakdown to last ten days. Six loaves of bread also. And they had filled our reserve water tank—fifty quarts, which likewise in a pinch would last a fortnight. This food and water ten-day reserve is a wise military-civil-police regulation obligatory for all airplanes and all automobiles which undertake from French territory to cross the Sahara. It has saved many lives.

There was a gray light in the sky, but dawn had not yet broken when we reached the air field. Our plane was ready, outside the hangar—a great white bird asleep in the grayness. We climbed inside it, handshakes, closed doors, the engine roared, and as pink dawn began to streak the field we rose into the sky.

No need during this first half-day's African flying for chart, map, or compass. Wauthier, though a daring ace when need be, was above all a practical, common-sense flyer. We simply straddled the railroad line and followed it south toward Colomb-Bechar, where all railroads end, and where our real adventure would commence.



Flying southward over North Africa for the first hour or two was exactly like flying over southern France—superb roads, a geometrical checkerboard of green and brown fields, truck patches, vineyards, well-kept farms, prosperous towns with churches.

But presently we came to the waste lands, the bad lands, approaching the Atlas Mountains; ugly, interminable, barren clay flats over which the railroad crawled toward Bechar. We crossed the Atlas through the high divide which the railroad follows, with tremendous peaks, higher than our own altitude, on right and left; more waste lands and then Colomb-Bechar, a fort, a military air field, and an Arab-looking town, on the edge of the desert. We stopped there hurriedly to take on more gas, gobble a few sandwiches, and be off. But we had hardly stepped from the plane when the then colonel in command of Colomb-Bechar rolled up in a big car; magnificent he was with swagger stick and scarlet coat, insisting that we stop with him for luncheon. He was an aristocrat, a viscount or something and a charming gentleman. But a polite formal luncheon, my God! when we wanted to cross the Sahara. Our Capitaine, however, proved himself a marvel of tact combined with hard bullheadedness. We lost some time in palaver, with no time left to eat our sandwiches, but before noon we were in the air again, Marjorie and I both pop-eyed with interest, getting our first impression of the Sahara from the

air. I will now tell the truth about that first impression. It was disappointing. It was just an ocean of sand, down there below us—and it didn't seem to concern us much. Later, finally, we learned its moods and its variety, which, like the watery ocean, are infinite—sometimes smooth, sometimes rippling, sometimes broken into enormous waves, changing color as a proper ocean should, except that the colors instead of ranging from pale green and blue toward black, ranged from pale yellow through glowing pinks, reds, and browns to purple. But this came later. There was merely an ocean of sand down there. And we had started across it. We tried to be thrilled, but we weren't very much thrilled. Likewise we were heading toward some episodes which, unless taken paradoxically, tended to knock any thrilled sense of daring adventure completely out of us. We didn't yet know the Sahara, and we were in for some highly anachronistic surprises.

For instance. Maps are like dictionaries. They never quite keep pace with the living words, the living facts. Thus today, as we were now to learn, the two principal stopping-places in mid-Sahara for any expedition which sets out in motor car or plane to cross the Great Sahara are neither marked nor named on any map. The first of these two extremely important way stations is an American bar, while the second is a gasoline pump.

The American bar, with brass rail, high stools, mirrors,

everything, is an excellently stocked miniature of the bar at the Paris Ritz or of a high-class New York speakeasy.

The gasoline pump, second important way station, is a white-enameled pillar identical with those you see along any road in Long Island or Westchester or in front of your next-door garage—except that it stands there in the sand, in the midst of nothingness, in the almost exact geographical center of the Sahara, stuck there like a pictorial infantile idea of the North Pole, the most lonely and isolated gasoline pump in the world or the universe. It is called Bidon 5, a name famous in Sahara exploration, but not yet known by the map-makers.

The American bar, on the contrary—first way station—finds itself in the hallway of a magnificent calcimined earthen fort with great, walled courtyards near the oasis of Reggan. This handsome mud fort, which is named Bordj Estienne, is the principal hotel of the Trans-Saharan Transport, founded by the two sons of the late General Estienne, the younger of whom, René, gave his life, massacred by the Tuaregs, in blazing the Trans-Saharan motor trail. The older brother, Georges, who was pathfinder for the famous Haardt-Citroën caterpillar expedition, still carries on as Trans-Saharan president and director general.

All afternoon, for long, long hours, we flew southward over oceans of sand toward this Bordj Estienne, where we planned to spend the night. Down below us was a

thin ribbon of trail, wheel ruts in the sand, the Trans-Saharan motor trail, which we were following. Marjorie read a novel and I took a nap.

A little while before sundown we saw black specks, far yonder ahead of us, scattered widely. They were the oases of the group marked Taurirt on the maps, of which Reggan, the Bordj Estienne oasis, is the principal one, though the name Reggan does not occur on the maps. They are date-palm oases, lovely green when you are down in them, but from the air they were black spots.

All this was familiar ground to Capitaine. He knew just which black spot to head for and we swooped gently down. The hard flat sand in front of the hotel, which stands a mile out from the oasis proper, was an ideal and limitless natural landing-field. We taxied up to the doorway of the courtyard. Out of it strolled an extremely suave, cynical, and casual young gentleman in Arab sandals, black silk flowing trousers cut in the Arab manner, and black silk shirt to match. But he didn't look Arab. Ultrafashionable pajama parade. He looked like Deauville, Juan-les-Pins, or Palm Beach. He grinned, shook hands with Wauthier, saying, "Last week we were full up—a French commission and a truck load of English tourists . . . my God, what a bore! . . . but now there's nobody . . . you've hit it lucky . . . whole hotel to yourselves . . . by the way you're a little later than I expected . . . you were signaled as having left

the Oran field at dawn . . . I expected to hear again from Bechar but around noon the wireless was working badly and nothing came through. What held you up?"

"The Colonel," replied Wauthier. "You know him. He was all dressed up in his scarlet coat and wanted to keep us for lunch."

We were introduced, casually, for he already knew, by wireless gossip, all about us and our trip. He was Raymond Bauret, of Paris, young but highly sophisticated and competent manager of this hotel and local director for the Trans-Saharan. All the servants, including the bartender, were Arab. We had whiskies and soda with him at the bar, American cigarettes, a French table-d'hôte dinner, illustrated French and English magazines less than ten days old in the lounge library, bedrooms with electric lights, modern-art curtains and counterpanes. We were approximately in mid-Sahara, but I believed it with difficulty. As I went to sleep, I had a sad feeling that if this was the great desert, it wasn't really worth the bother to have left Montparnasse.

## II

OUR CAPITAINE had a peculiar, diseased and I think at bottom poetic mania for flying at dawn. Thus we left Reggan in the pale, pink presunrise glow and could easily, if need be, by flying all day long, have arrived in Gao or even reached our final destination, Timbuctoo. Instead, we had decided, out of curiosity, to spend an afternoon and night at Bidon 5, the famous gas pump. Vanity figured in it, as well as curiosity. We wanted to be able to say, when we got back to Paris, that we had spent a night at Bidon 5.

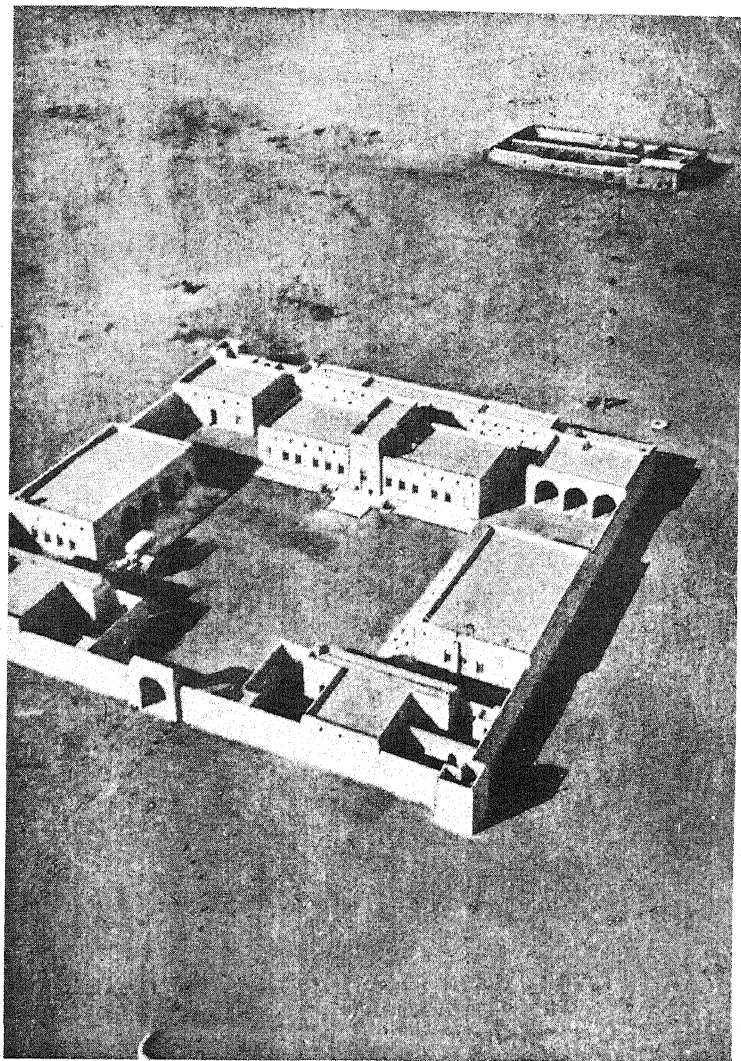
While Bidon 5 has not yet been marked on the maps, a whole mysterious tradition has grown up in France around it—hair-raising, shivery descriptions by journalists of its horrors and desolation, culminating in a story published in the *Matin* that the lone Arab guardian had gone stark, raving mad.

Long before the Trans-Saharan route was opened, and long before Bidon 5 existed either as a name or a spot, its particular locale was already surrounded by mystery and terror; for that particular immense stretch of mid-Sahara had been, up until the advent of motor cars and airplanes,

a forbidden death-trap from which neither man nor camel, once venturing far in, could ever escape alive. It is called the Tanesruft. It is a flat, hard, pebbly sand infinity in which there are no wells, springs, river beds, or any oasis refuge. When Georges Estienne, seeking a route south for regular motor travel, believing that he could abandon caterpillar tractors in favor of ordinary trucks and autos, decided to blaze his trail straight through the Tanesruft, the most hardened old-fashioned Saharans, including friendly Tuareg chiefs and officers of the French Camel Corps, told him he was crazy. But he realized that the time-water-reserve equation, which is the life-death equation in Sahara travel, was totally different in the cases respectively of motor cars and camels. He blazed the trail, established Bidon 5 in the very center of the Tanesruft, and cars now pass through safely, though the Tanesruft itself remains an immensity of stark and utter lifeless desolation except for the cars that pass, or the planes that fly over. No man on foot or horseback, no camel, no gazelle or jackal, can even today reach Bidon 5 alive.

And quite recently to this traditional reputation of the locality had been added the tale in the Paris newspapers that Bidon 5's guardian had gone mad from loneliness.

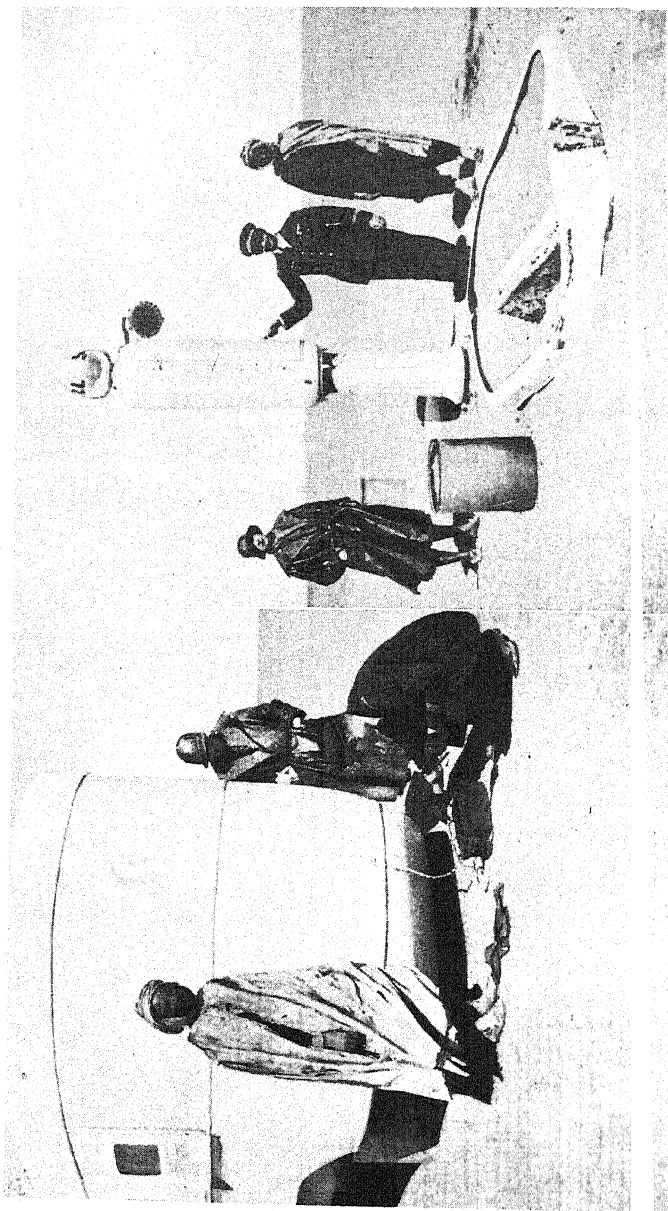
Bauret, the young Bordj Estienne manager, at dinner the night before had commented with cynical contempt



*Wide World Photo*

AIR VIEW OF BORDJ ESTIENNE, THE TRANS-SAHARAN  
TRANSPORT POST





*Wide World Photos*

LEFT: CAPTAIN WAUTHIER SENDING RADIO FROM BIDON CINQ. RIGHT: THE GAS PUMP AT BIDON CINQ;  
THE MOST ISOLATED IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

on the newspaper stories: "The horrors of a night at Bidon 5! Bah! You'll sleep like logs. It's the safest and most quiet spot in the whole Sahara. But it's nothing. Why don't you have a look at it flying over, and go on to Gao?"

It was true, however, we learned from him, that the Arab guardian had gone crazy. But not exactly from loneliness, as the press had said. On the contrary! The true tale was fantastic:

In the first place, said Bauret, the fault was really that they had chosen the guardian badly. He was a one-eyed man named El Beshir, from the oasis, that is to say, a fellow accustomed to human society, gossip, cafés, storytelling, and crowds. Furthermore, he was a little bit cracked before he ever went to Bidon 5. He had a pretty wife, quarreled with her and killed her, and then put out one of his own eyes in remorse. They had chosen him only because Arabs were superstitiously afraid of the Tanesruft and they couldn't get anybody else. They took him down there in a truck, left him plenty of food and water, and a month later Georges Estienne and Colonel Vuillemin dropped down in an airplane to see him. He cried and was constipated and begged to be taken back to the oasis. "Why? Was he lonely?" they asked. No, he explained in tears. It was just the opposite. He said that he was continually being visited by great caravans of Tuaregs, and now, worst of all, recently there was an old

Tuareg chief with a long white beard who came every night on a camel, and kept him awake all night long by playing on a flute. They reassured him, gave him some castor oil from the airplane engine, and promised to replace him as soon as they could. But he didn't wait. Eight days later when a motor truck passed, he had disappeared, having locked up the gas pump and the two dismantled motor-bus bodies which had been fitted with bunks and installed there as a shelter for travelers. Of course, he couldn't go far, there was nowhere to go, but what he did for nearly a month was to run off and hide, in a hole he made in the sand, every time he heard the far-away roar of a truck or airplane coming. Then when they had looked for him in vain, had passed on and all was silent again, he would creep back for food and water. They finally hunted him like an animal, caught him, calmed him, and took him to Gao. "Anybody would have gone crazy," he apologized, "listening to that flute."

We could see him at Gao, if we liked, Bauret had added: "He's perfectly harmless and hangs around the Trans-Saharan post. They feed him. He strolls by the river and sits under trees. Wherever he goes, he is accompanied, he says, by a French general and a bugler. He likes the general, but he complains that the noise of the bugle is going to drive him crazy again. He wonders how the other people at Gao can stand the noise of the bugle."

But despite that history, Bauret had assured us, we

wouldn't find Bidon 5 now locked or abandoned. He and Estienne, correcting their first mistake, had this time chosen as guardian a man who had never lived in any oasis, a former desert shepherd, already accustomed to the great solitudes. His name was Mohammed ben Taleb. He had built himself, Bauret said, a typical desert shepherd's hut beside the gas pump, and had not been troubled by caravans or long-bearded Tuaregs playing flutes.

And all this was why, instead of continuing on to Gao, we were planning to drop down at Bidon 5 and spend the night there. We were again a good mile high, over flat desolation, straddling the faint threadlike ribbon of the Trans-Saharan trail, along which a tiny black dot now clicked regularly every minute and forty-five seconds. These black dots were pillars made by standing big empty metal gasoline drums on end, every five kilometers along the trail, to guide cars and planes when sand storms temporarily wiped out all trace of wheels. Straddling this trail, we flew like the wind. Off at our left appeared cliffs and gorges, and behind them, far away yonder, a great mass of barren mountains. "Hogar," Wauthier scribbled for me on his pad. A magic name. The mysterious mountains in mid-Sahara, not yet fully explored, where Benoît placed his Antinéa's castle, his romance *Atlantide*, where the poet Arthur Rimbaud had wandered. We were skirting them now, not dreaming that by a trick

which fate still held up its sleeve we would be entering them before we left Africa.

How easy, meanwhile, and how simple, how almost boring, this Sahara flying was. We straddled the thin ribbon, and the black specks clicked by. Presently toward noon, ahead, was a white speck, shining, glistening. It was the famous Bidon 5. As we dropped and circled, it became two white-painted dismantled bus-shelters and the white gas pump. It became also the robed Arab guardian, Mohammed, waving up to us. The firm, hard, pebbly sand, level as a floor, was again a perfect air field. We taxied across it and cut off the engine.

Mohammed gave us greeting. He was not unhappy or lonely. He was smiling and helpful and glad to see us. But he, like his crazy predecessor, was constipated and had a headache. He asked us for purgative and aspirin.

We looked about us. In every direction was a bright, dead glare of nothingness, bright sand below, bright sky above. It was like being in the center of infinity, in a sort of bright-illuminated interstellar space—but when Mohammed unlocked one of the shelters, pulled out camp chairs, a camp table, even some dishes, and set them in the narrow shadow outdoors against one of the shelters, it was more like a picnic ground than a place of horror or desolation. It was late January, Ramadan, so that Mohammed refused to share our picnic lunch. Being a good Moslem, no nourishment could pass his lips till sun-

down. Even the pills that Marjorie gave him he tied in his kerchief. He would swallow them only after the sun had set.

Bidon 5, with all its mystery and newspaper horror, proving to be rather a bore in the hot afternoon after lunch, we went inside the shelters, found comfortable cots, and had a long siesta. Toward six o'clock we took a little stroll, venturing a mile or so into infinity, found infinity even more boring, and returned. We decided, to kill time, to cook a hot dinner. We had an alcohol stove. Mohammed brought me an extra casserole. He watched the pot eager-eyed, but at sundown went away to say his prayers, then came back and stood patiently as we began to eat. We told him to bring a bowl, if he had one. He brought a bowl, and since we had a great deal of food, including the remains of a large chicken from Reggan in addition to the canned stuff I had cooked, we filled his bowl high. He ate ravenously and we kept feeding him. He enjoyed most of all the green string beans and canned fruit. He needed them badly. When he had eaten hugely, and I thought we were all finished, I handed him the carcass of the chicken, and told him it would make him a good meal on the morrow when we were gone. He thanked me without comment, resquatted himself down then and there, and proceeded to devour the whole carcass, including the carapace, and all the breast and wing

bones, throwing away only the heavy leg and thigh bones which he could not crush with his teeth.

We slept on the cots in the shelters. The night turned bitter cold, but we had plenty of blankets. The mystery and horror of Bidon 5! I went to sleep again with a sense of disillusionment. Hotels de luxe, American bars, and gasoline pumps, however isolated, were not my idea of the Great Sahara. . . .

It was on the following morning that the sand storm hit us.

We were again luxuriously, glass-aluminum-enclosed, floating in the air. The Sahara was down there, sliding along, far beneath us, but it seemed really not to concern us much. We were not real people crossing the real Sahara. It had all been from the first more like a motion-picture travelogue. We were merely actors in a sort of picture of people, crossing a sort of picture of the Sahara.

I remember that Wauthier was still in his smart uniform, still chic and elegant, still wearing his light patent-leather shoes, almost like dancing pumps, which he had worn in Paris; Marjorie in fashionable Paris dress, still wearing the violets presented her by the president of the Aero Club at Oran, her finger nails still pink and glisten-

ing from a recent Paris manicure. We would be lunching presently on tongue, Camembert, Algerian hothouse grapes, and a bottle of champagne. We were glass-enclosed like hothouse grapes ourselves. There was a picture of a desert sliding along beneath us, but we had never really left Paris.

Ten minutes later, on our own legs, half-blinded, wind-torn, and sand-bitten, we were outside the still intact glass case, struggling with ropes, bags, and shovels to moor the swaying, groaning airplane—to prevent the storm from lifting it up like a paper kite and bashing it to pieces.

The intervening ten minutes had been crowded with events of various sorts. The first was that the seeming crystal firmament in which we floated in our crystal cage began to change color, or rather to take on color without losing its luminosity, without becoming opaque. In the beginning it was pale, clean orange-yellow, glowing, and did not decrease our previous visibility. That is, we could see the far-off horizon, and could still see clearly the desert sliding along not more than a couple of thousand feet below us, but it was as if we saw them now through orange-colored spectacles. I moved up to the monkey-seat beside Wauthier, to ask what was happening. He wrote



calmly on his scroll-pad, "*Crois entrons vent de sable*"—"Think we are riding into a sand storm."

At the same time he speeded the engine, settled back, and began to climb. I supposed that we would ride easily upward and out of it, as one climbs up through a cloud bank. But now the plane began to bump and jar and shiver, while the clean yellow glow outside was changing rapidly to an ugly, dirty, thick, reddish yellow, opaque like a fog, in which horizon and the earth below began to disappear.

Before it became completely opaque, a queer episode happened, as queer as meeting ghost ships at sea. Suddenly, on our left, and very close, appeared two other airplanes, crossing us northward, also struggling for altitude and buffeted by the wind. They were heavy-duty biplane two-seaters, probably army machines, though we couldn't make out their markings, cumbersome but powerful. Then they were gone—ships that pass in a fog.

By that time, horizon and sky had disappeared and we were being badly buffeted. At a given moment Captain Wauthier made his decision. He wrote on the pad, "*Pistolet, forcé atterrir*"—"Get ready with the pistol, we must land."

The pistol was not for firing bullets. It was for rocket grenades about the size and shape of a tomato can on a stick, which made a prodigious amount of red fire and smoke. It helped gage exact distance to earth, and more

important still, showed the exact angle of the wind. He had taught me how to use it the morning we quit Oran, in case of emergency. Now was the emergency.

I got the pistol ready, jammed in the bomb. Wauthier banked at a steep angle, and began circling, losing altitude. Presently, despite the fog, we saw the earth, but it was tilted and looked uninviting. He motioned, I pushed down a window, poked the pistol half out. The wind tried to tear it out of my hands. I managed to let off the bomb. It hurtled downward, red, lurid, trailing heavy smoke, and landed. It glowed there on the too-close, tilted earth like a red eye, and the smoke became a black, straight arrow. We circled round it, buffeted still, but less than in the higher altitudes, at about five hundred feet, perhaps even lower. Wauthier motioned me to let off another bomb. The pistol and one bomb had been placed conveniently together in a locker. The extra bombs were in a pasteboard carton tied with string under Marjorie's armchair. During all this time she had never moved or asked a question, and I had been too busy to think about her. She was sitting, dead quiet, pale as death beneath her make-up, and was holding in her two hands a little plaster statue of the Blessed Virgin. I had last seen it on a table in her Paris apartment, adjacent to some cocktail glasses, but with a tiny vase of tiny flowers, like the vase and flowers of a doll's house, at its feet. How she had smuggled it aboard the airplane and where she had hidden

it, and how she had gotten it out of its hiding-place without having apparently ever moved from her arm-chair, I will never know.

Maybe it had been hidden under the chair with the bombs. I pulled them out, rammed another one in the pistol, and let it off. We seemed now to be only fifty or a hundred feet above the desert, skimming over it, almost touching it. And it seemed to be smooth and flat. We leveled out heading straight into the wind, slowing the motor. The wheels touched lightly, surely, touched again. *It was* smooth and flat. We rolled along it, braked by the wind itself, and stopped. After the buffeting we had endured above, this seemed to be comparative peace and safety. It was only when Wauthier had shut off the motor, after the motor's normal noise and vibration had ceased, that I realized the plane was groaning, shivering, swaying dangerously.

Up to that moment Wauthier had always treated both Marjorie and me with a sort of friendly deference, tinged occasionally with sly humor. As he cut off the gasoline now and turned in his seat, his young face was older, hard, cold, impersonal. "Out, both of you! Do what I tell you! Ropes, sandbags, and the shovels!"

The wind tore at our clothes, the sand stung our cheeks and hurt our eyes, but with our backs to it, we could stand up and keep our equilibrium. The stuff was in a locker in the tail of the plane. In a moment we were all at work,

Wauthier roping, mooring the big bags to the wings and the tail, Marjorie and I with the two shovels working hurriedly, awkwardly, to get enough preliminary sand into the bags to hold them steady while he finished the roping. The sacks had wire rims to hold their mouths open, but they jerked about and we spilled lots of it. There were five bags, two for each wing and one for the tail. Each would contain several hundred pounds of sand. Marjorie's high heels and clothes were hampering her, and I knew from my own feelings that her palms must be already blistering, her wrists and back hurting her, but when Wauthier, the last knot tied, grabbed the shovel out of her hands and began using it himself, she looked as if she was going to cry. She stood idle, helpless, at a loss, watching us work. "*Allez!*" Wauthier shouted at her angrily. "Use your hands! Use your hat! *Vite!* Don't stand there like an imbecile!"

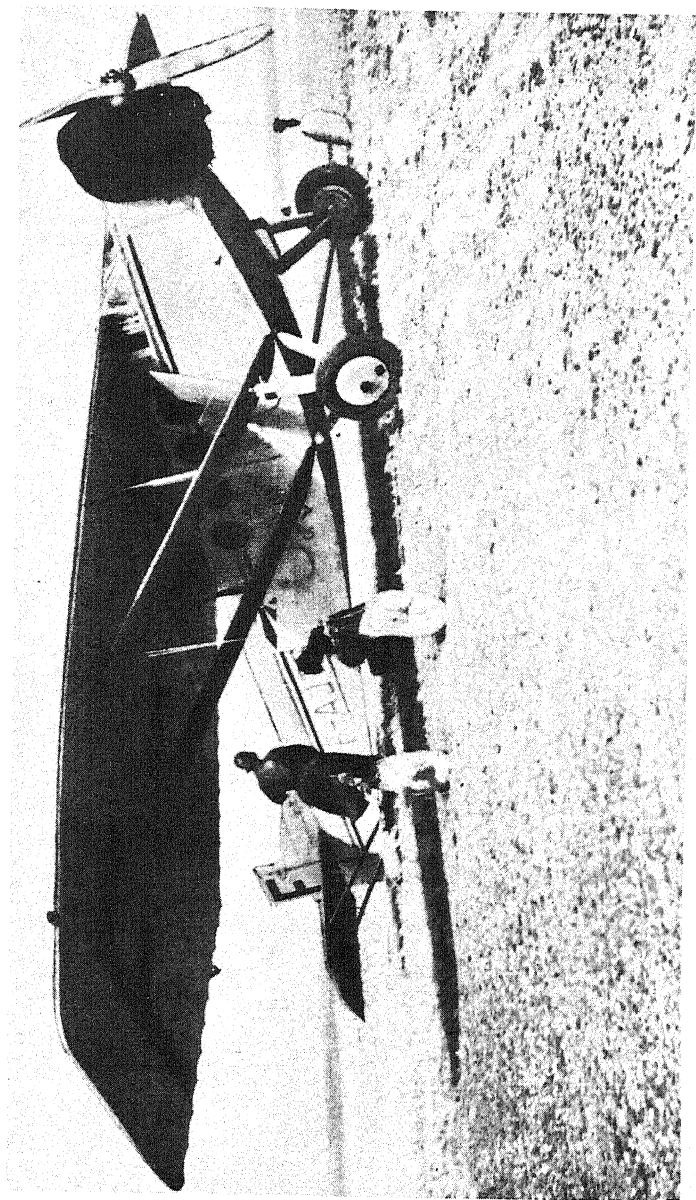
Women are curious creatures. The look she flashed at Wauthier was a look of pure cowl-like gratitude as she got down on her knees, like a hysterical scrubwoman in a cyclone, beside the sandbags and began digging with her naked hands.

I felt sorry for her, but at the same time there is something agreeable in the sight of a handsome young lady novelist from New York working like a scared chain-gang nigger, clawing sand with her overmanicured finger nails, in the middle of the Sahara Desert.

Decidedly—I realized at last—we had left Paris and the Café du Dôme quite a long, long way behind.

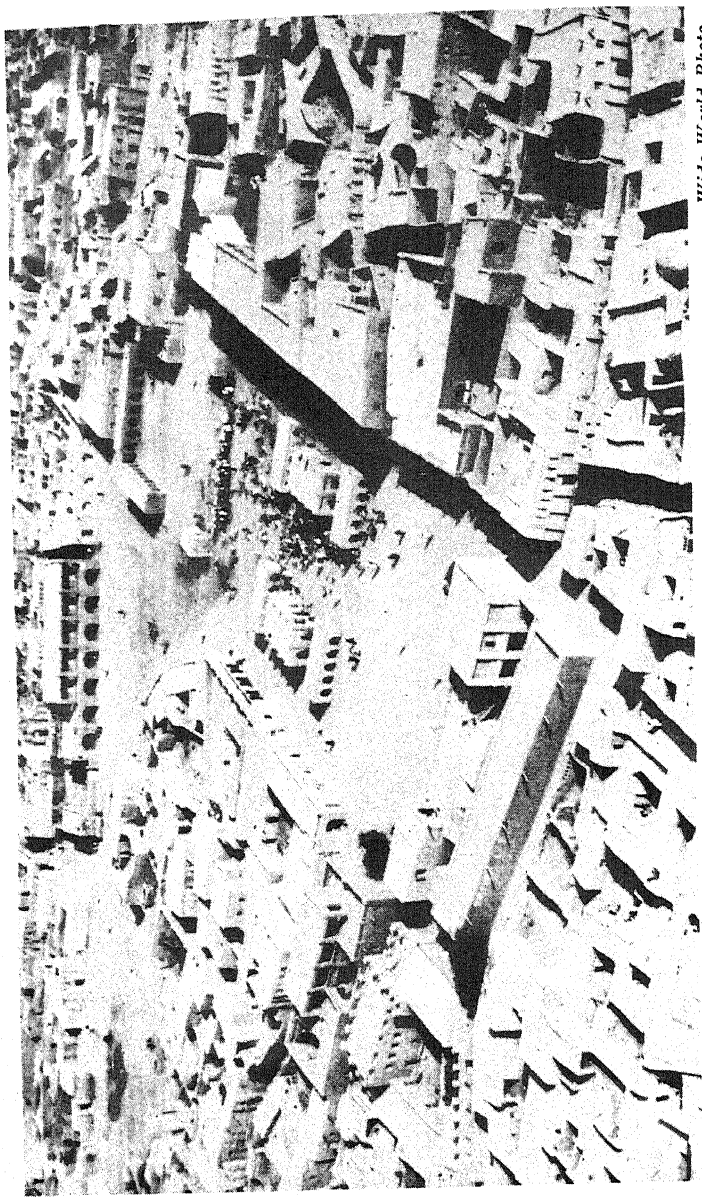
The plane still groaned and shivered, but it had stopped tossing and swaying. We strapped a cover over the engine and plugged the exhaust pipes. The main work was done, but Wauthier continued snapping sharp commands. Small dunes had begun to form around the sandbags. Behind one of these dunes, out under the wing tip, we dug a trench about two feet deep, six feet long, and wide enough for us all to lie in. Following his orders, we banked this trench with our reserve water tank, a heavy cylinder, and our reserve provisions, canned goods, mostly. In the trench we were well protected from the wind. Also we wrapped ourselves in our burnouses, heavy woolen hooded Arab cloaks bought in Oran. We might have been three camel-drivers. We had a drink of rum, some hot coffee from the thermos bottle, passing its tin top from hand to hand, and lighted three cigarettes. We were again (short commands and obedience over), three good companions.

We were safe now, even if the wind grew stronger and bashed the plane to pieces despite its moorings. We had water and provisions for at least ten days, and if we didn't turn up at Gao inside of three, there would be planes and trucks out scouring the desert to find us. Sahara flying in French territory is, in that sense, like navigating on the high seas. Planes, whether private or



*Wide World Photo*

TYING DOWN THE WINGS WITH SANDBAGS



*Wide World Photo*

AIR VIEW OF TIMBUCTOO, THE CENTRAL MARKET

military, are signaled on departure and arrival at all radio points, and whether they send out their own s.o.s. or merely fail to turn up within a given time, the whole world knows it and hurries to the rescue.

Meanwhile we were snug as three bugs in a rug, in our hole in the Sahara. Finally we were really in the Sahara. We felt good. We lighted more cigarettes.

"By the way," said Wauthier suddenly, with a puzzled grin at Marjorie, "did you bring a doll along on this expedition?"

"You mustn't call it a doll," said Marjorie sweetly. "Madame Francioni, my cleaning woman at Toulon, brought it to me last summer after her pilgrimage to Lourdes. I hid it because you told me we mustn't bring an ounce of extra weight. I hope you won't scold me."

Instead of scolding her, we took a census, and discovered by mutual confession that there were seven extra celestial (or demoniac) passengers aboard our plane, to wit:

"1 Blessed Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, already accounted for.

"1 St. Christopher, protector of all travelers whether by land or air or sea, in the form of a gold medal given Captain Wauthier by his mamma and suspended round his neck beneath his shirt by a thin gold chain.

"3 ditto in silver, secreted in his wallet and on other parts of his person, gifts of his various fiancées.



"I ditto in my pocket, very handsome, with an airplane engraved on its reverse, gift of the Princess Violette Murat.

"I not-precisely-saint secreted elsewhere on my person, gift of the black witch Wamba, and about which the less said the better."

We had again taken off at the crack of dawn, so it was now only about nine o'clock in the morning. We were snug in our hole, but the sand storm was blowing as hard as ever. It might continue, Wauthier said, for minutes, or hours, or days. If it stopped before two o'clock, he said, we would try to take off and make Gao. Otherwise we would have to dig in and wait the morrow. St. Christopher seemed to be indicated. We will promise him, we said, three magnificent gilded candles if he gets us safely out of this hole.

In the meantime, it proved to be a very good hole indeed. It was just right for the three of us to lie down in comfortably. The blowing sand kept building up the little rampart-dune behind our heads where we had cached the water tank and provisions, giving us better protection.

We were curled up in it, huddled together like cave people, like a cave family, like good animals of the field who know how to take care of themselves when the great storm comes. We had a good hole which we had dug with our own hands; we had where to lay our heads. And thus we slept for the third time in the desert. Slowly dropping

off to sleep, we spoke slow words now and then to each other. We said, "This is pretty good," meaning "This is better for the desert than hotel bedrooms with modern-art curtains and autobusses parked for picnics." Wauthier said, already half-asleep but arousing a little, "Yes, it is, but people would think we were crazy if they heard us say so." Marjorie said dreamily, not unhappily, "Lord, Lord, Lord!"

When we woke up it was three o'clock in the afternoon, and what waked us was that the sand storm had stopped. "I think St. Christopher is with us," said Capitaine. "We have four good hours of daylight and only about three hours of real desert to cross—suppose we try to make Gao."

Twenty minutes later, with all our stuff restowed, Capitaine touched the delicate little handle on the dashboard, the engine let out a true and mighty roar at the very first shot of the compressed-air starter. The plane raced across the sand, rose like a bird let free, and we were flying southward toward the Niger.

Again the desert was a sea of sand sliding along beneath us, but it was no longer detached from us, no longer uninteresting, no longer impersonal.

A short distance south of Bidon 5, quite close to the trail, lies the smashed skeleton of an airplane, its ribs beginning to be covered with drifted sand just like the skeleton of a camel. It belonged to an able aviator, a

Monsieur Obreck. He too had made a good forced landing in a sand storm—but he had forgotten or neglected to bring along his ropes and sandbags. The Sahara is like the mighty ocean. It is safely navigable—but it does not forgive mistakes. It can make skeletons of airplanes as easily as of camels.

We were flying still above the Tanesruft, the flat south-central sand waste, but we were rapidly reaching its southern limit, approaching the clay-and-scrub tracts which lie between the real desert and the Niger. We were flying low and Wauthier scribbled that we would soon see signs of life.

We were as low as five hundred feet when a flock of several hundred gazelles crossed under us, racing, leaping in beautiful confusion, frightened by the noise of our motor. We dropped even lower, skimming above the scrub, and soon crossed other great flocks of antelopes, biches, more gazelles. To watch them as we flew low as they raced with high-curving leaps was like listening to music; it was even more like following visually the written score of a piece of music in which there are high-treble arpeggios and trills.

We were quitting the desert. Presently we crossed a company of men on camels who waved up to us, and later a company of black-veiled Tuaregs on horseback, who lifted their empty palms to show that they were friendly.

Sometimes they still foolishly pot-shot at planes with rifles.

Caravan trails began to cross and zigzag; we passed camps of tents made with skins; then, far-off gleaming lines of silver and green-gold began to appear ahead of us along the southern horizon. We were approaching the Niger. Wauthier began to climb, and in another quarter of an hour we were over a territory of many waters, for here the Niger is not merely a mighty river, but rather a tangle of wide-spreading shallow lagoons and marshes, gold, green, yellow in the slanting evening sunlight, forming designs a mile down below there like Chinese dragon screens, like a gigantic batik scarf spread out below us to mark the route to Gao. We flew, following it, the great curve, the great "buckle," as the French call it geographically, of the Niger. Less than three hours ago we had been huddled in a hole in the sand. Time and space take on Einstein qualities in an airplane.

From our height Gao, when we first saw it, seemed merely a big collection of mud huts, but as we dropped, circling, it became an important Arab city with a European quarter, while what had seemed a group of warehouses in a sand flat out behind it became the hangars of the military air field, one of the biggest in French west-central Africa.

We landed smoothly in the gathering twilight, and taxied up to the huge black-gaping sheds in which a

dozen big army planes loomed in the shadows, mechanical prehistoric monsters.

A little man in shabby khaki and sandals, with gold stripes on his sleeves, and pale tired blond mustache, bareheaded, since the sun had set, strolled nonchalantly toward us, timing his arrival to coincide with Wauthier's shutting off the engine and stepping out of the plane.

Wauthier had opened and stepped out of the narrow forward door, just behind his seat. We had opened the rear door near our seats and were waiting to descend, or to be said, "How do you do" to, or something. We were also fumbling in our pockets for matches and cigarettes, which would taste good after not smoking for hours. But so far as our presence was concerned, nothing happened.

Wauthier and the little man stood there beside the plane, talking in the silence and the twilight. The little man had begun by saying:

"*Tiens*, it's you then. You were signaled to arrive this morning. We waited lunch for you."

Wauthier said, "We stopped for a while, and then came on."

The little man said, "My wife had lunch waiting for you."

Wauthier said, "We couldn't exactly help it. There was some wind and sand."

The little man said, "That explains it. By the way, have you seen Lieutenant Le Bideau?"

Wauthier said, "Not since last August a year ago at Paris in the Castaglione bar."

The little man said: "He left Timbuctoo this morning before dawn with Le Bézier, Didier and Lekorfek in two 4CV 6's to check up some of the markings on the trail, and they were to be back here at noon. My wife had lunch waiting for them."

Wauthier said: "Yes, they passed us heading north in the lower Tanesruft ten minutes before we stopped. They were beating against the wind."

The little man said: "Well, they must be down, then. They were due back here at noon. My wife had lunch waiting for you all."

During this conversation the little man had once or twice glanced through the glass at us where we were sitting. He had looked at us without showing either approval or disapproval, as if we might have been baggage or wooden boxes.

Another man in tattered khaki, also with gold stripes on his sleeves, had meanwhile strolled over to where we were. He was big, hulking, red-sandy, about forty-five years old. He didn't look like a French aviator, though of course he was one—or any sort of aviator. He looked like a sergeant of American Marines. He was, as a matter of fact, a bombing captain, veteran of the World War.

He poked his head in through our narrow door and said, petulantly:

"Look, is it true that the people who send out booklets and call themselves Rosicrucian societies possess the real secrets of the Christian Rosenkranz?"

He bothered me more than the whole Sahara Desert. I said: "For God's sake, what makes you think *I* know? Let's get out and smoke a cigarette."

As Marjorie descended, he made some gestures toward her as you do to a lady to whom you are presented in a big drawing-room, but all he said to her was: "Are your novels translated into French? Were you seasick in the plane? Are you going to write a novel about this trip?"

And then we were four people, standing beside the plane while a corporal and some Arabs busied themselves to hoist its tail on a kind of hand truck, and garage it for the night among the mechanical monsters in the hangar.

Nobody exactly introduced us, or them. We gathered that the little man was Captain Rouxel, commandant of the Gao air force, and that the big man worried about the obscurer phases of mysticism was Captain Weymel. We talked and smoked cigarettes, Marjorie and I saying very little. We gathered that both Rouxel and Weymel had heard all about us by the unofficial gossip of the official military Saharan wireless stations. And we gathered—there is a certain kind of French politeness which goes deeper than any gestures of hands or words—

that we were accepted there as being for a little time a part of themselves, that they knew already about us, about our trades and businesses in life, and that they could cut direct, as we could, toward essentials without preliminary wasted words and gestures.

The sand storm had certainly wrecked Madame Rouxel's luncheon, if not our plane. What had happened to Le Bideau, his two planes, and his three companions, we were yet to learn. Except that their nonarrival helped wreck the luncheon, nobody seemed unduly concerned about them. We piled into a car, picked up Madame Rouxel, who proved to be charming, drove into Gao, and all dined at the Trans-Saharan Hotel.

Again we ate French table d'hôte, drank champagne, sat on high stools afterward at an American bar in the heart of Africa, and slept in beds with modern-art counterpanes—but this time it was all right. We knew in spite of it that we had really left Paris, that we had really flown across the Sahara, and that tomorrow morning, St. Christopher still willing, we would be in Timbuctoo.



### III

WE FLEW from Gao at daybreak, to breakfast in Timbuctoo. Gao and Timbuctoo are neighboring cities in the great bend of the Niger River.

To do it you have no need of map or compass, for you just go high up in the air, a mile or two miles, and then follow the river. At moments, nevertheless, it is like trying to follow one thread in a basket of multicolored wool that has been dragged all over the earth's floor by a gigantic pussycat. Always, however, in the midst of the gold, red, black, pink, yellow, knots, threads, and tangles which are creeks, lakes, lagoons, and swamps, there is a deep-green thread—the river channel.

It was pretty flying in our little winged sun parlor of aluminum and glass, protected from the wind yet open to all outdoors. Down yonder, in microscopic miniature, flocks of camels and horned cattle grazed, tinier than ants, while fishermen's mud villages were anthill agglomerations, brown-yellow. Capitaine was munching chocolate, Marjorie was manicuring her broken finger nails, I was getting some black coffee out of the thermos bottle.

Capitaine, who knew Gao like a book and all its eastward territory as far as Tchad but who had never before made this little excursion toward Timbuctoo, licked his fingers and scribbled on his knee pad,

“Are you sure you’ll recognize Khabara?”

Khabara is the river port of Timbuctoo. Timbuctoo is back among the dunes, at the end of a long unnavigable lagoon; in the sand, and presenting all the aspects of a desert city, it is neither precisely in the desert nor on the river. I had told Capitaine I was sure I could recognize Khabara, for I had lived there and hunted and fished all over its neighboring waters—but Capitaine, who had been watching the clock if not the compass, wrote presently:

“Two days kitchen police for you. We’ve missed Khabara.”

So we circled around a bit looking for Khabara. We were still a couple of miles high but starting to drop down, when we saw (still in microscopic reduction) an agglomeration of Arab buildings which seemed to be on water.

Capitaine pointed and asked with his eyebrows if it might be Khabara. I shook my head. I hadn’t the remotest idea what it was, but I knew it wasn’t Khabara. I began to suspect it was a mirage, for on the outskirts was something that looked like a Spanish bull ring or a Roman amphitheatre.

Then, by a flash of dumb, idiotic, god-sent intuition;

I recognized the obvious. The bull ring was the Colonel's vegetable garden, circularly planted, irrigated in the hollow of the dunes, covering several acres, the pride of Timbuctoo. That night he'd send us lettuce and tomatoes, maybe even strawberries.

I grabbed Capitaine's pencil and scribbled triumphantly.

But it was by now flat news to Capitaine, also to Marjorie, though neither of them had ever been there before. I had been mystified by a well-known thing seen from a new, unfamiliar angle, but they had both already guessed it must be Timbuctoo, since it couldn't very well be anything else.

We dropped low and circled it for fun, very low three times, so low that I recognized the old caravanserai, the mosques, the market, the Caid's house, and even Daviot's grocery store; and then, beginning to see people waving up to us, I began to imagine that I recognized some of the people too, and stuck my head out, as excited as a chow dog looking out of the window of a limousine.

There were a good many people waving from the open square and flat roofs, for our silver-winged monoplane with its long, narrow, streaming, white-gleaming body must have been a sight wholly different from the familiar army biplane busses of the region.

We circled low, skimming for a third time over the flat terrace-roofs of the famous city, mud-built, but

gleaming in the sunlight as if reilluminated by an afterglow of its ancient glory.

On the pointed pinnacle of the minaret of the Mosque of Omar, glittered—instead of the Moslem crescent—its white ostrich-egg remembered, and more familiar still on the roof terrace of a mud palace which I recognized in the center of the native town was a figure which I now surely also recognized by its white prophetic beard—there are no two such beards in Timbuctoo, or in Central Africa—my old friend, Père Yakouba, to whom I had telegraphed from Paris and again from Oran.

The schoolteacher told me later that at this precise moment Yakouba was saying:

*"Tiens, it's droll just the same. The last time he came on a donkey!"*

The air field was down by Khabara, on a sand flat near the river. To reach it, we flew for a few minutes over what looked like a sparse haphazard but innocent orchard in sandy soil. It was the little forest of scraggly thorn trees which three years previous had been a black, trackless land of mystery in which my donkeys had lost themselves and us for half the night. It was ridiculous.

The air field was all-out-doors with a segment of local scrub and thorn trees cut off it. In front of the hangar was a lanky young man in khaki overalls and a dilapidated helmet, with a keen, lanky New England face, a face such as Calvin Coolidge might have had in his youth,

but on the whole more likable. He had no gold stripes at all, but just the same he was master of the air field—Sergeant-Pilot Laperasse, as we learned. We were to learn likewise that he was what the French call a *numéro*, which corresponds in antiquated American slang to “a hot number.”

He was not at all intimidated by the gold stripes of our Capitaine, who was clambering out of the cockpit. He said to him:

“So you crossed Le Bideau and his crew in the sand storm. They haven’t been heard from yet; we were talking with Gao.”

Just then he spied Marjorie, took a good second look at her, left the Capitaine flat, assisted her to descend from the plane with exaggerated gestures as one does a princess in a musical comedy, offered her an English cigarette, and said:

“You’d better put your helmet on, if you’ve got a helmet.”

We all had helmets. We rummaged them out of a locker and put them on. Meanwhile some robed Negroes and two or three Senegalese orderlies had strolled up and saluted vaguely, waiting to be put to work.

“Breakfast is waiting for you,” said Laperasse.

“We’d better put the taxi in the garage first,” said Capitaine. “We are going to stay here, you know, for several days.”

"I hope you'll survive it," said Laperasse. "I've been here for two years now."

So we put the taxi in the garage, got our baggage on to the heads of the robed Negroes, and walked up through the scrub for a quarter of a mile to a romantic motion-picture stage—set on the banks of the Niger—which Laperasse told us was military aviation headquarters for Timbuctoo. We entered by the back yard. In this back yard were many monkeys, some of the bigger ones chained to trees, some chattering free in tree branches, and several leaping on us to paw in our pockets. There were also some long-legged birds, waist-high, storks, cranes, or something of the sort, which strolled about impudently as if we were intruders, and a gazelle with a bright leather collar which seemed convinced it was a house dog, since instead of running away it came up and sniffed at us.

There was also a young white Arab human female, not precisely naked nor clothed, not precisely clean nor dirty, but definitely colorful and pretty in her wild manner, and just as definitely at home there as any of the other animals. As she sat, regarding our arrival with a mixture of good will and distrust, with her superb mane of hair, her bare calloused feet, her bare and natural upward-pointing breasts, swathed around her middle with bright cloth bought surely from Daviot's grocery store, she suggested (though there was nothing fatal or sinister about her) a synthesis of all the heroines and villainesses of

all the tropical plays and movies which have ever been produced since early Conrad.

This on-the-whole-pleasing phenomenon arose languidly from where it had been sitting with a pigeon and a monkey, and approached us, but said good day only to Marjorie and took Marjorie by the hand as if to lead her to some secret and unknown washing-place or harem. She managed, without seeming to snub or disapprove of us, to treat Capitaine and me—also Laperasse—as if we didn't exist, as if we hadn't come into the yard at all.

It was so strong that Marjorie followed her without question, and they went away together I know not where.

Laperasse, as we went into the house, said: "That's Lalla. I had to beat her last week, because ever since the Josephine Baker records came, she wants to go to Paris. I don't want to go to Paris. I like it here."

We went in to where he lived. His preference for remaining there was understandable. It was a big, rambling, one-story Arab mud house with thick walls against the heat; the back yard and back porches were shaded by trees; the front of the house with its open porches was agreeable even in the morning glare, giving on beautiful water, so that you knew it must be dreamlike in twilight.

He took us into the main dining-room, where our breakfast was waiting. It was the officers' mess, or rather the flying-African-pilots' mess, since he, a sergeant, was boss of it and always sat at the head of the table. The

breakfast waited intelligently. Scrambled eggs or boiled ones cannot wait. Neither can hot coffee. It was white wine, bread, cheese, hard sausage, radishes, and butter. Marjorie reappeared, freshened, to join us. We saw no more of Lalla that day, but we were to see a lot of her later.

Airplanes, in a speedway-speedcar-speedboat-fast-express-train area where you can get from one place to another anyway at a mile a minute, seem more or less ordinary. But here in a vast territory where other normal means of travel, such as camels, donkeys, poled or paddled canoes, move only at four miles an hour and mount up in their journeys to days, weeks, or even months, the airplane is a sort of Herman Melville white whale, fantastic, incredible. It takes from four days to a week, normally, to make the trip from Gao to Timbuctoo. I had done it once in five days. Now with the plane we had left Gao at dawn and were breakfasting here at eight o'clock of the same morning. We ate some more bread and cheese and drank some more white wine.

While we were finishing breakfast, a little black boy, scared, and naked except for a strip of cloth around his middle, was also present in the big dining-room. He materialized out of nothing, without having knocked at the door, and without any one's having seen him enter. He was talking breathlessly but volubly, with Laperasse, in local Arabic dialect. Laperasse said:



"The boy says that the chauffeur of the automobile of the cousin of the son-in-law of Père Yakouba is waiting on the other side of the lagoon, and that all your baggage is already in the automobile."

So we really were here. Thirty-one hours of air time from Paris to Timbuctoo. I knew it was nothing special that we had done—that other people had made more important, more distinguished, more amazing flights without getting unduly excited about it—but I couldn't help thinking again of Melville and his white whale, and I couldn't help wishing that as roaring and great a person as Melville would please be born again to ride over seas and continents in an airplane—and to write something adequate about it afterward.

A more immediate and less important marvel was this automobile of the cousin of Père Yakouba's son-in-law. Three years before, when I had lived for a little while in Timbuctoo, there had been no automobiles. Ensconced in this one, another phenomenon awaited us which had not existed three years previously in Timbuctoo—to wit, a raving beauty of the popular-magazine-cover type, "great big beautiful eyes" which she couldn't make believe and a mouth like Greta Garbo's. She was Madame Jean Dubos, wife of the new civil administrator, full of pep and hospitality, and to me a more surprising local marvel than the motor car, since the total white female population at the time of my former visit had numbered

five, to wit, a sergeant's wife, a French storekeeper's wife, a doctor's wife, a schoolteacher's wife, and the post-mistress, none of whom was passably pretty or exciting to look at.

We all piled in with the too-beautiful Madame Dubos, on top of the baggage, and careened wildly for ten minutes among sand dunes and thorn trees. We drove straight to the caravanseraï, set in the sand just outside the city. Nothing was changed here; black Boubekar, the caretaker, with his black wife and barking dog to welcome us; the vast, bare, thick-walled old Arab traveler's house still full of bats and bull bats. We disposed our baggage, washed our faces, changed our shirts and strolled into the city, first picking up Monsieur Dubos, who hadn't been able to come with his wife to the air field. Then we all went through a winding maze of sand lanes, among massive Arab houses and mud palaces, into the heart of the city, to call on Père Yakouba, who was waiting for us.

I soon discovered that Timbuctoo itself, though boasting now a unique beauty in the person of Madame Dubos, and a unique automobile, hadn't otherwise changed in these three years. I hope it never will change. It is, I believe, the only city in the whole wide world which has none of the banal blessings, or curses, of what we choose to call "white civilization." It has palaces and courtyards, manual arts and trades, Moslem luxury and comfort which you only discover if you are invited inside

these palaces, but it hasn't one hotel, not a single public café, restaurant, bar, saloon, or church, no electric lights, no billboard advertisements, no street cars, no taxis, no ice, not a single pane of glass, not one American or English resident, not one single Christian priest, prostitute, or preacher. Despite its wireless station and air field, it remains isolated, medieval, Moslem, self-sufficient. It has lost its ancient glory, but it still remains Timbuctoo the remote, if not the mysterious. We had reached it in thirty-one hours of actual flying; a motor car at certain seasons of the year can get there in ten days from Algiers; but the normal mode of travel from Paris to Timbuctoo is down the west coast by boat, by slow train from Dakar to Bamako, then long days on the river Niger to Khabara, and finally to Timbuctoo itself by donkey. It takes normally from a month to six weeks. Despite rare planes that drop down as we did, and rare motor cars, it remains remote.

Its leading citizen is the man I had come to see, old Père Yakouba, former missionary-monk of the White Fathers, who has already in his lifetime become almost as mysterious—and misrepresented—a legend as Timbuctoo itself. He chose, long years ago, to abandon his priestly robes, marry a superb black wife, go magnificently "native," and beget a wide-flung progeny. But instead of becoming the ridiculous renegade outcast of fiction, he had become, as I explained in my former book, the

greatest authority on native languages and dialects, the greatest adviser and specialist in native affairs, in the history of West African colonization.

His wife, Salama, now an immense motherly Ethiop queen, in gorgeous robes, great golden earrings, bracelets, and anklets, received us at the door of their mud mansion.

"Go right upstairs," she said. "He's expecting you."

The old man, twinkling-eyed, white-bearded, swathed in an Arab burnoose, was in his library, which gives on the upper terrace. He had everything ready, including a formidable array of bottles, and the great stacks of manuscripts, old photos, tintypes, documents, which I had come to see him about and to carry back with me.

In a half-hour it was all finished. And since that was the only real purpose for which I had come to Timbuctoo, we could, if need be, have left Timbuctoo that same day. But the Duboses wanted us to stop awhile and play with them, and so did our friends at the air field. So we spent several days as spoiled and petted "guests" in French Timbuctoo "high society."

Conventional people back home, whether in France or America, if transported into that particular circle would soon begin to suspect that not only pilots and visiting writers were crazy, but that everybody else in Timbuctoo was crazy. I suppose maybe the white residents of Timbuctoo are a little bit crazy. But it is a kind of craziness I like.

For instance, on the way to the Dubos's for luncheon, we stopped to pick up a young man named Koupery, proprietor of a local trading post (a grocery store). We stopped at his house. We were received by a black, grinning devil of fourteen who was dressed in caricature of Napoleon Bonaparte, blue eighteenth-century cutaway with enormous silver buttons, canary silk waistcoat, and cocked hat. From the waist down he was naked.

Several months before we got there, Dubos told us, this boy hadn't been Napoleon Bonaparte. He had been a captain of French cavalry. Koupery had tricked him out in a cavalry officer's brilliant dress coat, gold stripes, epaulettes, and medals, and with gold-striped officer's cap to match. Natives and passing Tuaregs, including Tuareg chiefs, had begun solemnly saluting the storekeeper's house boy, and this was considered to be an excellent joke by the white masters of Timbuctoo, until occasionally, when in the dark or in a hurry, white corporals, sergeants, and on one memorable evening, a commandant, saluted hastily and saw their mistake too late. They complained individually to Koupery, who refused to do anything about it. But finally he yielded and changed his boy into Napoleon, when a discreet word came from the Colonel, saying that perhaps it had been a good joke, but "*ce n'était pas la peine d'insister.*"

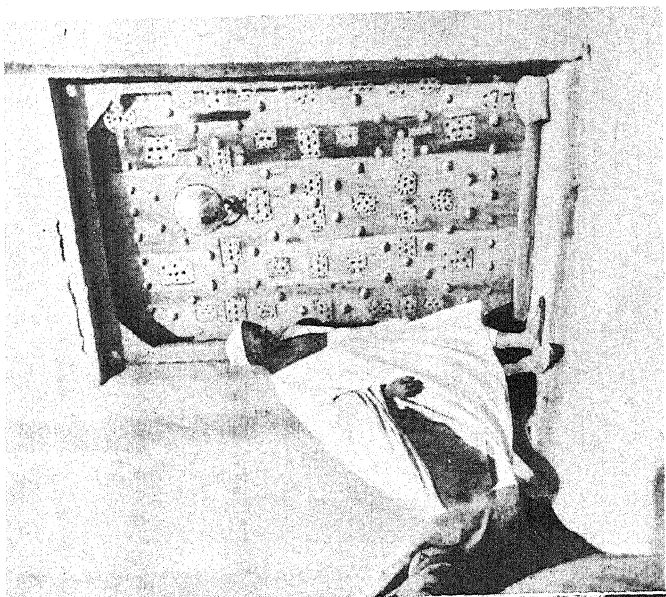
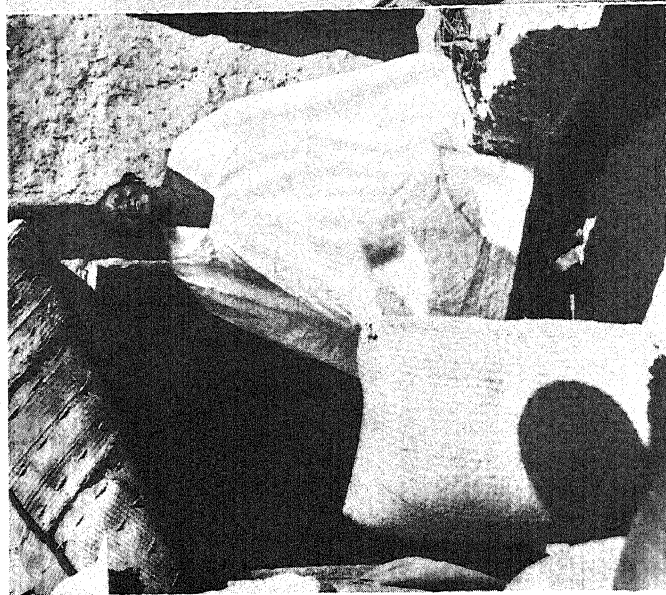
Koupery now appeared and we were introduced. He was a tall, extremely handsome, sad-faced young man.



*Wide World Photo*

CONFERENCE WITH PÈRE YAKOUBA AT TIMBUCTOO

LEFT TO RIGHT: DUBOS, CIVIL ADMINISTRATOR; PÈRE YAKOUBA; SEABROOK



*Wide World Photos*

LEFT: SALAMA, FIRST LADY OF TIMBUCTOO, WIFE OF PÈRE YAKOUBA. RIGHT: THE DOOR OF  
RÉNÉ CAILLÉ'S HOUSE IN TIMBUCTOO

He was queer and disturbing. I sensed something unnatural, abnormal. I wondered whether it might be opium, hashish, or perhaps some obscure sex-twist. It was nothing of the sort, I later learned. It was much simpler, and more normally abnormal. It was merely a matter of false environment or displacement. I have begun to believe that false environment or displacement is a key to most phenomena which seem mysterious, monstrous, or abnormal.

There is nothing more normal or commonplace than, for instance, a pack of cigarettes—on a table or in your pocket. But if you climb a tree for bird's eggs, in a jungle where no white man has ever been before, and find cigarettes instead of bird's eggs in the nest, it is disturbing. There is nothing more normal or commonplace than a girl in high-heeled slippers, sheer silk stockings, and a diaphanous ball-gown—in a ballroom. But find her at the bottom of an abandoned coal mine or on a mountain top in Central Asia! If you don't believe in this basic "displacement" criterion, carry it further yourself in imagination. Submit it to tests of your own. Imagine finding a live sparrow or a rattlesnake in your factory-sealed package of breakfast food. A severed human hand or a severed human head is commonplace, normal, on a dissecting-table. But Cabestan's heart in a dish is a monstrous horror. Monsieur Koupery's secret was sad but not shocking. He was the younger son of a rich, aristocratic,



titled family in France, destined for Saint-Cyr, the French West Point, and a probably brilliant career, both military and social. His family had been economically smashed, reduced to poverty in the world stock crash, and here he was, keeper of a grocery store—he couldn't have borne to have done it back home in France, so he had come to the colonies. I guessed, as a natural corollary, that buying bright uniforms for his black house boy, dressing him up as Capitaine Fracasse and Napoleon, was probably a Freudian compensation.

Having picked up Koupery, we went on to lunch at the Dubos's, where we met another disturbing, but not displaced, member of Timbuctoo society in the person of their little five-year-old daughter. She had a pony, which she rode with the ease of an Arab, she spoke not only French and Arabic, but Bellah, Peuhl, and several other local dialects, so that frequently she acted as interpreter for her father; she smoked cigarettes and had a preference in wines. For reasons of her own, she called red wine *vin monsieur* and white wine *vin madame*. When annoyed she said, "*Duh-bule!*" which the grown-up Duboses eventually learned was a Bellah slang expletive corresponding exactly to the American expression "Balls!" She was in no true sense, however, a naughty, spoiled, or perverted little girl, but simply a phenomenon of this strange colonial life. She would have driven any group of child psychologists or social-welfare workers crazy,

but she was at bottom a healthy, good little girl, and she will probably grow up into as beautiful and charming a hostess as her mamma.

It was an episode late in the afternoon which displayed Madame Dubos's peculiar genius as a hostess. It was toward six o'clock, after we had had a short siesta, and at a moment when we were preparing to go and call on the Colonel. At this inopportune moment one of the young pilots arrived, on horseback, from the air field. He was tired and depressed. He had the *cafard*, which means "cockroach" in the dictionary but in slang "the blues." He had been drinking. He was morosely half-tight already. And he wanted more drink. The Duboses liked him, but we were expected at the Colonel's, and besides nobody enjoys playing hostess to and nursing a potential crying drunk. I suppose that back home I myself, and nearly everybody else I know, would have felt that hospitality was amply covered by giving him another good big drink, pleading an engagement, and ushering him quietly out of the door with a pat and a push and excuses. But Madame Dubos, first lady of Timbuctoo, had a different idea of hospitality. She said to him:

"Here are the keys to the wine closet. You'll find whisky, gin, and everything you want. Drink all you want. Go to bed in such and such a room if you can, or if you're on the floor when we come back, I'll put you to bed. Good-by, and don't break any furniture."

# IV

ON THE day following our arrival in Timbuctoo, we were all invited for lunch at the air field. Madame Dubos, who had promised to help with the luncheon, went out ahead with her cook, in the famous automobile of the cousin of the son-in-law of Père Yakouba. The rest of us followed on horseback.

Arriving we found a whole sheep roasting, barbecue-fashion, in a pit behind the kitchen, and in the mess hall two women who both looked like Hollywood movie stars on location, arranging the long table, while Josephine Baker's voice blared "*J'ai Deux Amours*" from a tin-horned phonograph on the bar. One of these women was Arab Lalla, mistress of Sergeant-Pilot Laperasse and pet of the air field, bare-breasted, barefooted, wild-haired, beautiful with a scarlet cloth swathed round her middle, looking as if she had just stepped out of a colored lithograph of an Oriental slave market; and the other, of course, was Madame Dubos, wife of the civilian administrator, chic, fashionable Parisienne, in riding costume and boots, also beautiful, but looking as if she had just stepped out of the grand stand at Longchamps. They

fussed about happily, intimately, like a couple of sisters, arranging flowers, glasses, innumerable bottles, and Marjorie soon made a third to help them, while Wauthier and I went out in the shaded yard to gossip with Laperasse and play with the monkeys.

When lunch was ready we sat down ten at table, but with fourteen covers laid—the four extra places for the pilots and mechanics of the two planes which we had passed like ships in a fog in the sand storm above the Tanesruft. They too, had gone down in the storm, and had now been for two nights broken down in the desert. Nobody worried about them. They had reserve food and water. They might be back any time. It would be a nice literary touch to add that they might never come back. But things don't work that way in well-organized military French desert flying. If they remained lost too long, other planes would go out to comb the desert for them.

As a matter of fact, Laperasse had guessed well. They came back before we had finished luncheon. We were eating melon when there appeared in the doorway a pair of grinning bandits with four days' growth of beard and grimy hands; they looked like war prisoners, murderers, escaped convicts, except that their eyes were nice. They embraced Lalla and Madame Dubos, were shyly introduced to us, had a drink at the bar, and sat down at table without washing up. They were Sergeant-Pilot Didier and Sergeant-Mechanic Lekorfek. Lieutenant Le Bideau

had also returned, but he had elected to shave, wash up, and change his shirt before coming to table. He was, we were to learn, in all respects a wholly different breed of cat.

Up to the arrival of our two escaped convicts, the conversation at table had not touched on aviation. Koupery, the misplaced grocery storekeeper, had been developing a thesis that there were two distinct forms of realism in literature, the comparatively childish materialistic, physical realism of Zola, and the much more devastating moral-philosophic realism of, for instance, Max Stirner and Machiavelli. Captain Weymel, the bombing captain worried about his soul, who had followed us over from Gao, was saying every once in a while, "But what about the Rosicrucians?" or, "You must agree with Frazer and Reinach that the original Christ-legend is a solar myth." Laperasse, who though only a sergeant was in charge of the mess and sat at the head of the table, kept saying, "Who cares?" or, "For God's sake, shut up!" But Weymel wouldn't shut up. He had a fixed erroneous idea (to the vast amusement of our own Capitaine), that I was a specialist in comparative religions, sent into the Sahara by fate to tell him something. I think that's why he had followed us over from Gao. But now we all wanted to know what had happened to Didier, Lekorfeek, and their expedition. One of the two heavy-duty machines, after both had successfully ridden out the sand

storm, had been forced to land because of loose cylinder bolts, and the second machine had landed beside it to help. They couldn't fix the bolts, and when they decided to leave it there to be salvaged later by motor trucks, all planning to return in the second plane, they found that it was out of commission too—a gas pressure pump gone wrong. So they made camp, set up an impromptu machine shop in mid-Sahara, took both motors to pieces, and from the pieces managed finally to reconstruct one plane which had brought them all back. They laughed about it now, though it must have been a tough job in the desert glare and heat. But they were tough fellows. They laughed and ate, and drank enormously.

The luncheon was quite over, though we remained at table, when their flight chief, Lieutenant Le Bideau, came in. As I say, he was another type of flyer, a different breed of cat. He was a sensitive, reserved, neurotic, rather beautiful young gentleman, with a face startlingly akin in a spiritual sense to the photographs of Colonel Lawrence, Alain Gerbault, Shelley. He was pale, and very tired. While the rest laughed and smoked and drank, he sat silent, scarcely touching his food, with a far-away look in his tired eyes. He was a great pilot, they whispered to me. People outside of aviation felt that he was a snob, but it was easy to see that his tougher companions adored him—whispered about him as if he was a god.

It was thrilling, and strange in a way, to be here now

around the same table with these flyers whom we had passed unknown in the sand storm like ghost ships. They also had seen us, wondered who we were, whether we would outride it, and whither we were bound.

There was a lot of champagne, served, as the French nearly always do, with and after dessert. We all, except Le Bideau, ended in the late afternoon by getting mildly tight, and welcomed with joy the fantastic proposal of Laperasse that we go crocodile-hunting in the lagoon.

Dubos, who was as tight as any of us, but kept some vestige of common sense, insisted that if the women went, it would have to be in one of the big iron scows. There were two or three moored in front of the house. What a sight theirs made as four great singing black men, naked except for their loincloths, poled it away from shore across the reedy water! What with Lalla, two other Arab girls, Madame Dubos, and Marjorie, not to mention the five-year-old Dubos phenomenon, it looked more like a floating harem or an imperial galley in the time of Tiberius than any sort of a hunting expedition, though Monsieur Dubos sat solemnly at the prow with a shotgun and a rifle. Our Capitaine too had borrowed a gun, but he had elected likewise to go along with the ladies.

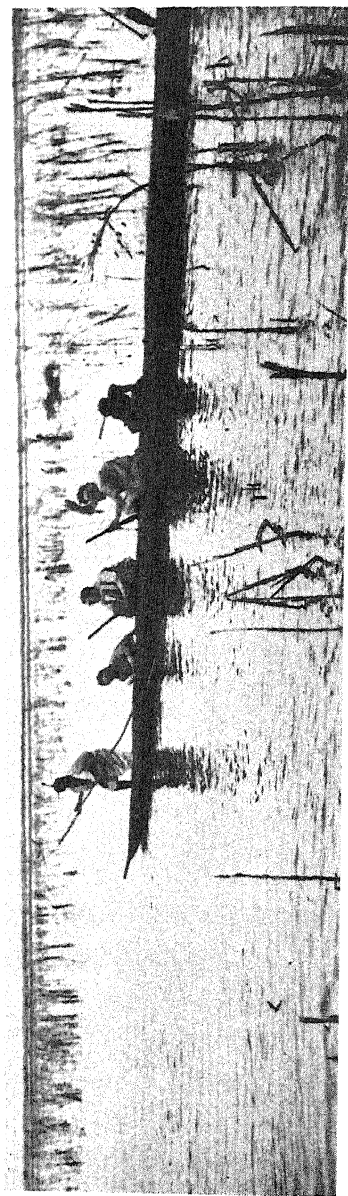
As for Laperasse, Koupery, and me, we were really going to shoot a crocodile—or at least we thought we were. So we waited until that noisy gang had gone almost out of sight, then embarked silently in a native



*Wide World Photo*

STREET IN FRONT OF PÈRE YAKOUBA'S HOUSE IN TIMBUCTOO





*Wide World Photo*

CROCODILE HUNTING IN NIGER LAGOONS, NEAR TIMBUCTOO

pirogue made of reeds and bull's hide, which we poled ourselves—in the opposite direction. We were well equipped to kill a crocodile. We had two guns, explosive bullets, and a bottle of rum. But about half a mile from shore our canoe came unsewed (that is, an important seam did) and we began to sink. We happened to be over a sand bank, so that it was only waist-deep, so we mended the seam with Laperasse's shirt, and continued on our way.

We encountered no crocodiles, but just before sundown, we sighted far ahead of us a flock of armored ducks and took a crack at them with buckshot. The armored ducks of the Niger are ornithological monstrosities. They are as big as a full-grown sheep and so thick-boned, so heavily feathered, that ordinary duck-shot won't even ruffle them. But they are worth trying to kill, for they are magnificent eating. A fillet from one breast makes a plank steak for a whole dinner party. They all flew away but one, whose wing we had evidently broken; it started swimming full speed ahead for a neighboring reed-marsh sand flat. We gave chase, poling mightily. When our pirogue grounded, Laperasse leaped out like a wild man and continued the chase on foot, splashing through the shallows. He fell into a deep spot, swam out, got afoot again, and disappeared among the reeds. Quite a while later he came back, without the duck.

It was dark when we got back to the landing. The

imperial scow had already long returned, and they were dancing to the blare of the phonograph on the mess-room terrace. Later we supped, with more champagne, on the remains of the luncheon, and got home after midnight.

The next day or two we spent more calmly, in the native city, with Père Yakouba, Salama, and their family, eating cous-cous on his lovely terrace, sipping Pernod, Picon, or sweet nonalcoholic Arab drinks, while we discussed *Huckleberry Finn*, which Yakouba was just then rereading, Aristophanes, the Greek pornographic poets, and the early Church Fathers. In Yakouba's noble company we also called on the native notables, including the new *cadi*, since Yakouba's great old friend Ben Sidi Labas was dead, the blacksmith-jeweler, and the imam of the Mosque.

All this was calm, sweet, restful, and instructive—but pretty soon, in spite of ourselves, we were swept again into the gay social life of which Madame Dubos was the radiant center. We danced at her house and at the air field, we went on a lion hunt with flashlight reflectors strapped to our foreheads and massacred an unhappy jackal; we gave a cocktail party on the roof of our *caravanseraï* which ended at dawn a following morning—and in that gray dawn Capitaine, Marjorie, and I held a solemn conference. We decided that while we all three

might be up to the gayety of night life in Paris, London, or New York, the social pace in Timbuctoo was too fast for us—in short (repeating a purely personal history with new variations), that it was time to crank up the aerial taxi and be on our way.

Having crossed the Sahara and done our job, we were planning the return to Paris by a different and easier route. We were planning to drop down to Bamako, in the Soudan, flying thence to Dakar, the capital of French West Africa on the Atlantic coast, thence north along the coast, following the Aero-Postal route by easy stages, Casablanca, Barcelona, and Toulouse. But this easy aerial tourist's program, though we did begin it by dropping down to Bamako, was destined never to be carried out.

On the afternoon before we left (this was Monday, February 1) a wireless bulletin came through which Laperasse casually showed us—but which seemed at the time to have no possible remote concern with our own plans—saying that the famous flyer Reginansi, who had taken off from Paris on a more or less beeline flight for Madagascar (pioneer work for the proposed establishment of an aerial mail route), was down in the edge of the Hogar, out of gas, at a spot between In Salah and Tamanraset. It was tough luck that they were down, but no cause for special apprehension on the part of anybody. They would normally be easily located by planes from In Salah, the nearest air field, refueled, and on their way

again tomorrow. Reginansi, former army man, was a competent, brilliant flyer, and besides he had a complete equipment and personnel, including a wireless sending and receiving apparatus aboard which was working perfectly, handled by Lenier, a professional and experienced operator: the third member of the *équipe* was Touge, an equally experienced pilot-mechanician. Naturally, or so it was taken for granted, they had their normal ten-day emergency supply of water and victuals aboard. Normally, also, they would be found within a day or two at the latest. There was no reason for anybody, not even their wives or sweethearts at home, to worry or get excited.

So that without a thought of Reginansi, or of the Sahara, or the Hogar, so much as in the back of our heads, we lifted from the field at Timbuctoo on the dawn of Tuesday morning, February 2, straddled the beautiful Niger, and flew down to Bamako, in fair winds, without incident, for lunch. We thought our Sahara adventure was over. As a matter of fact (particularly for Marjorie who was destined for a desert odyssey all her own) it hadn't even commenced.

# V

**B**AMAKO, on the Niger, capital of the Soudan and rich metropolis, is a gay French city though deep in tropical Africa. Connected by railroad with the great, ugly Atlantic port of Dakar, and with the interior by steamboat, it teems with business, handsome villas, hotels de luxe, clubs military, civil, and tennis, jazz bars and "dancings"; has even a Club Lido like Paris and every other gay French city—that is, a club with a swimming-pool where you can play water polo with pretty girls or sip iced drinks at tables round the pool while you watch others disport themselves in the water.

Its big air field, where we landed, is close on the city's edge, less than ten minutes from the jazz bars and dancings. A lieutenant-pilot named Juhaud, nicknamed Le Caid and a captain-pilot named Morgan, though he was as completely French as the Palace of Versailles (there is a distinguished New England family of Mayflower stock named Du Vivier and a Russian baron of ancient lineage named Royce-Garrett), were expecting us and had luncheon waiting on the terrace of the mess hall. Juhaud was a portly, twinkling fellow and Morgan a

dark, tall, slender Rudolph Valentino. They were glad to see Wauthier and to hear all the latest gossip from Gao and Timbuctoo. They had local gossip of their own to exchange. They were tuning up their own planes, under orders, anticipatory to a bombing expedition in the north. They invited us unofficially to come along, if we liked, and see the fun. A group of Arabs from the Rio del Oro, they explained, raiding down through Mauritania, was pillaging caravans in the Soudan. These occasional raids from the Rio del Oro, a territory owned technically by Spain and controlled actually by nobody, are about the only peacetime "diversions" which still occur in otherwise conquered Africa. In fact, said Juhaud, who liked and admired the Rio del Oro raiders, though he was about to drop a load of bombs on them, they were the only big-league bandits, the only large-scale robber-barons who survive in modern times. They raid outward in well-armed horse and camel bands all over the west Sahara and even down to the rich fertile plains of the Soudan. And once back across their own border, among their own fortress strongholds, they are immune from pursuit. Europeans who have ventured in exploring, occasional military or Aero-Postal flyers who have been forced down in the Rio del Oro, have been nearly always killed, enslaved, or held for heavy ransom. Stout fellows, said Juhaud, who led a wild, free, savage life and weren't afraid of anybody.

All this at luncheon, after which, before we piled into Morgan's flivver to explore the jazz bars and dancings, we had a long siesta, from which we were awakened by Marjorie to participate in an incredible though trivial incident which proves, if nothing else I have written does, that all aviators are crazy. In the yard behind the mess hall, Morgan and Juhaud had installed a zoo, which we had visited. There were storks, gazelles, antelopes, mongooses, all wandering familiarly about like dogs or house cats, a lion in a makeshift cage, nearly fifty feet long, while in another immense cage, constructed of heavy chicken wire, there was a wilderness of chattering apes, baboons, marmosets, monkeys, at least a hundred of them, of all sizes and descriptions. Marjorie, generally a very quiet person, toward the end of our siesta banged on doors, shouted, and awakened us in some excitement. All the animals, she said, had broken loose from their cages. We hurried out on the terrace. A big baboon scurried past us into the house. The monkey cage was empty while its recent inhabitants were running wild all over the place, in trees, on the porches, on the roofs, festooned even on the steering wheel of Morgan's flivver. Nor was that all. Over against a barbed-wire fence, scratching his back lazily in the shade, was the lion.

Morgan grinned sheepishly at Marjorie, who was still excited. "It's all right," he said; "they always come out in the late afternoon. The baboons tore a big hole in the



top of their cage last winter, and we haven't bothered to fix it. They all go back of their own accord at feeding time."

"But the lion!" said Marjorie.

"Same thing," replied Morgan still more sheepishly. "He gets hot in the afternoon, and there's a bar loose which he can squeeze through. He'll go back when it gets cooler."

Marjorie pondered this for a while, and then, to save her embarrassment over the alarm she had created, said:

"But if it's that way, if they can get out any time they want to, why do you keep them in cages at all?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't just know exactly," replied Morgan slowly, "except, I suppose, you'll admit that it's natural for animals to live in cages. It's customary, the same way it's natural for people to live in houses. Let's go to town and have a cocktail."

So we piled into the flivver, and on the way to the air-field gate stopped at field headquarters to see if there were any new orders about the proposed bombing party. Juhaud asked if Reginansi had been found. Juhaud was particularly interested because he himself had once crashed in the Hogar at a time before things were so well organized, had come out on camels disguised as an Arab chief (hence his nickname Le Caid) and had returned later to salvage his plane.

No, said the clerk at headquarters, Reginansi hadn't

been located yet, but everything was all right. Their wireless was working perfectly. They had landed beside a camel trail and Colonel Vuillemin himself (the greatest of all Saharan flyers, now commander of the air fleet at Algiers) had already started south to supervise the search in person.

We read some of the bulletins sent out by Lenier, Reginansi's wireless operator. Looking back on them now, they fill one with admiration for the gallant, sportsman qualities of those three high adventurers caught in what eventually proved to be a death trap from which, at the last, they barely escaped with their lives. All the bulletins were reassuring and courageous. Some of them had even a touch of humor.

*"All goes well,"* one of the first ones said, after their forced landing, *"we've got a little gas left and are going to try to make it back to In Salah. Please be ready to refuel us and have some fresh fruit."*

Another message:

*"We're down again, completely out of gas. But in good health and spirits. Airplane intact. Please listen in continually, and we'll keep in touch with you."*

Another message gave their supposed exact latitude and longitude (which proved later to be wrong), and added:

*"We're near a camel trail. Everything's all right."*

Another one said:

*"We've picked up a jazz concert from Berlin."*

And still another:

*"An antelope just came to have a look at us. We'd rather have seen a brewer's cart coming with a load of beer."*

*"Des chics types"*—"Swell guys," said Juhaud. "They'll be all right. Let's go and have some beer ourselves. Do you dance, Miss Worthington?"

So we went into Bamako, spent a gay evening, and slept at the hotel.

The next day, which was Wednesday, February 3, Juhaud and Morgan being busy with preparations for their bombing party, we didn't go near the air field at all. We went shopping, hired a taxi by the hour and rode sight-seeing about the city, bought a wrist watch and some oranges.

Passing the cathedral, we suddenly realized that we were again in a Christian city (there has been no church or mission for many a year at Timbuctoo), and that it was high time to remember our sand-storm promise to St. Christopher. So we rang at the Père Blancs' (Augustinian White Monks') mission opposite the church, and were received by the superior—the Reverend Father Auguste Bazin. He was a black-bearded, white-robed veteran of the sands, and humorously sympathetic toward our request. We told him about the sand storm, and explained that we didn't want ordinary candles for St.

Christopher—we wanted big special candles, gilded and blessed.

That would be a little difficult, he said, in Bamako, but yes, it could be arranged. The *père cordonnier* (shoe-maker monk) of the mission could buy fifteen or twenty pounds of common candles in a grocery store, melt them down, remold them into three big ones, and gild them nicely. He himself would see to it that they were duly blessed and placed before the statue of St. Christopher in the church across the way.

He asked about the health of our old friend Père Yakouba, who had so many years before quit his robes. He shook his head, smiling sadly, as we talked of Yakouba, and said, "Do you know, he could have become bishop of the Sahara." He spoke sweetly of Yakouba, if sadly. I think that nearly all the White Fathers in West Africa, while regretting the loss of Yakouba to the Church, have still a love for, perhaps even a certain pride in, their legendary, patriarchal, wandering lost lamb.

It was on the following day in Bamako, Thursday, February 4, that luck, fate, chance, the black witch Wamba's "fan-shaped destiny," or anything you choose to call it, stepped in to change our plans and course completely.

In the afternoon, we went up on the hill to the palace to call on the Governor. It was partly a visit of ceremonial politeness on Wauthier's part, but it was also that

we were flying on toward Dakar next day, and thought of dropping down first to visit Administrator Briolle if he was still stationed at Konakry. We thought that at the palace we could find out definitely. The Governor, it turned out, was absent for the day, so we were received by the secretary general. It was merely a visit of formal politeness, but just as we were leaving, the secretary said:

"Isn't it terrible about Reginansi?"

"What terrible?" asked Wauthier in complete surprise.

"Why," said the secretary, "it's life and death now. I have just been talking with the wireless station. The situation has completely changed. Reginansi's abandoned the plane, which hasn't yet been located, wandering off on a desperate hunt for water. Their sending apparatus has gone completely dead. Nobody understands about the water—everybody took it for granted they had a ten-day reserve—but the last, almost inaudible short-wave message indicates that they are perhaps already dying of thirst."

"Jesus!" said Wauthier in a whisper.

"There's still a chance," continued the secretary. "You know of course that Vuillemin is on the scene already, directing the search in person; the whole air fleet is out; Poulain, head of the Aero-Postal at Algiers, is on the scene, too. They'll find them, but it's nip and tuck now whether they will find them alive or dead."

Our Capitaine was silent as we came out of the palace, got into our taxi, and started down the hill. Then, "Let's stop the car, Willie, for a minute if you don't mind, anywhere here by the road before we get back to Bamako. I want to talk with you for a minute."

We stopped the car.

"You see," he said slowly, "I'm in a peculiar position. I'm a ranking officer-pilot, but not under orders just now, because I'm on vacation, a forty-day leave of absence, and you are my companions, my partners—sharing the fun and the expenses, too, of a vacation joy-ride. On the other hand, without vanity, I am an experienced desert flyer with a plane specially adapted for desert observation, and with a wider cruising range than the regular army planes. Vuillemin is the greatest of all Saharan flyers. He and his fleet are already there. But it's just conceivable that I might be of some help, that maybe I ought to offer. I'm worried. I don't know what to do."

I said, "Please don't think about our side of it. If necessary Marjorie and I can go back to Paris by boat and train. Do whatever you think you ought. We like you and love you."

Wauthier had been looking hard at me. He said:

"Well, since it's that way, I know what to do. And we've got to do it in a hurry."

On the way down the hill into Bamako, I said: "I suppose you know that if you could arrange it without em-

barrassment, I would give my shirt to go along with you."

He said: "I'd thought of that. I would like you to come along. Two men are better than one. You could say you're a mechanic. But I wouldn't take a woman into it, for her own sake and for other reasons. All the baggage and extra weight, too, will have to be dropped. And we'll have to do something about Marjorie."

"I want you both to go, if you can," said Marjorie. "Whatever you arrange will be all right."

Passing the hotel, Wauthier jumped out and telephoned the air field. If Morgan hadn't already started north on the bombing expedition, he wanted Morgan to come in and help him quick. We kept the taxi. Morgan joined us in less than ten minutes. We drove to the main official wireless station, which is in the city. Marjorie and I waited outside in the taxi. Morgan and Wauthier went in by a private side door. Fortunately they found the manager himself. In less than three minutes they were in direct communication with the Air Ministry at Paris. In less than three minutes more our Capitaine had his answer back:

*"Put yourself immediately at the disposal of Colonel Vuillemin."*

## VI

**B**EFORE daylight the next morning, Friday, February 5, we were in the air again, headed back toward Gao and the Sahara to join in the hunt for Reginansi. Marjorie was still with us, and all our baggage. We had considered that problem the night before and come to a decision which pleased her and all of us. If we had left her in Bamako (as we for a moment considered doing), to return to Paris by the boat and train route, it would have taken her a long month to get back, would have been for her a bore and an anticlimax. So we had arranged another plan. We would take her up with us to Gao, and confide her there with all the baggage to our friends of the Trans-Saharan Transport. They would shoot her straight up across the desert, following us by fast motor truck, to Reggan, where, after we had done whatever we could to help in the Reginansi search, we would pick her up and all return to France together.

Another reason which seemed to make this plan more practical was that at any moment Reginansi might be found, and in that case there would be no point in leaving Marjorie behind at all.



However, when we reached Gao late that afternoon, Reginansi had not been found (nor had he been found the next day when we touched Reggan on our way to In Salah—though that is getting ahead of the story).

At Gao, Rouxel, Weymel, Lieutenant Bézier, who had been down in the Tanesruft with Le Bideau, and another young lieutenant named Fournas were all on the field to meet us. The situation and the psychology had completely changed. They were strained, worried, serious. They talked of nothing but Reginansi. It was far in the north, beyond their territory, but they wished they could go too. As it was, they were dropping everything to help us go. The Reginansi wireless, we learned, after sending out that final weak and disquieting message which implied that they were in desperate straits for water, had remained silent. But Captain Rouxel had all their earlier messages, together with the bulletins official and unofficial from In Salah, which they had been studying, trying to analyze.

The now admittedly desperate situation of the famous flyers had developed rather slowly, though up to their momentary stop and take-off again from In Salah on the afternoon of Sunday, January 31, they had flown with record-breaking speed. They had left Istres, the big military airdrome near Marseilles, at midnight Saturday, January 30, with Touge at the wheel, and crossing the Mediterranean by night had reached Oran before break-

fast, Sunday morning, had refueled quickly, and by eight-thirty were in the air again, out over the great desert, with Reginansi soon relieving Touge at the wheel, and Lenier sending frequent messages, which were picked up by all the North African posts and relayed back to Paris. At two-thirty in the afternoon, still that same Sunday, having crossed the whole North Sahara, the Grand Erg Occidental, they had dropped down on the military field at In Salah. For reasons which have never been fully explained, they stopped only for a scant few minutes, took on neither fuel nor water, and were off again, heading down across the western edge of the Hogar, toward Tamanraset (Fort Laperrine).

But in the late afternoon, deceived first by an abandoned camel trail which led nowhere, and then by the fact that the actual conformation of the Hogar Mountains in that district is totally different from the conformation and altitudes given by the topographical charts, they lost their way. They continued by compass alone, still trying to make Tamanraset, but as darkness fell found themselves barred by peaks and cliffs nearly seven thousand feet high in a territory where by their charts there should have been no mountains with an altitude of over three thousand. There was nothing to do but come down, which they did safely, in the flat desert at the foot of the peaks, to wait the next morning's light.

At seven o'clock on the morning of Monday, February

1, they were in the air again and sent out reassuring messages, some of which we had previously seen. Rouxel now pulled the sheaf out of his pocket to refresh his memory:

*"Slept in the desert. Now in the air looking for Tamanraset. Please light a big fire and make a lot of smoke."*

An hour later, just before eight o'clock, there had been another message:

*"All goes well. Still looking for Tamanraset. Please listen in continually."*

At nine o'clock:

*"Can't find Tamanraset. Coming back to In Salah."*

At ten o'clock:

*"We're down, completely out of gas."*

All that had been Monday, and it was now late Friday afternoon. What had happened to them since? The truth was that nobody knew—except that they hadn't been found . . . that their radio sending machine was dead . . . and that by some mysterious accident or oversight, they had been apparently, from the first, without reserve supply of water.

Our Capitaine, I think, would have gone on that night, even though we knew that the greatest Saharan experts in the world were already doing all that was humanly possible, but Rouxel wouldn't hear of it. He was prudent. Nobody would appreciate it, he pointed out, if we had a breakdown, or got lost too, and merely caused additional trouble. Our plane must be tuned, checked over,

refilled, etc. That alone would take most of the night. He had another piece of advice to give Wauthier—which was to leave all that to him, to go to the hotel, go to bed right after dinner and get a good night's sleep. They would awaken him at three-thirty in the morning when all was ready. As for me, he said, I could give them a hand at the hangar, since I could sleep as much as I wanted next day in the plane after we had taken off.

Madame Rouxel appeared, and became from that moment a mother, an elder sister, to Marjorie. Likewise pretty Madame Biscarat, wife of the Trans-Saharan manager. We needn't worry at all about leaving Marjorie, they assured us. They would take care of her. They would see that she had everything she needed and that she got off safely when the truck was ready to start north with her.

Our plane had been rolled into the hangar, and the mechanics were already busy with it. "Suppose we all go in to the hotel and have dinner," said Rouxel. "We have to eat."

After dinner, leaving Wauthier and Marjorie at the hotel, we went back with Rouxel to the hangars. I remember our job there—we worked until long after midnight—as a sort of distorted dream, seen with queer modernist lighting effects in a Soviet movie. What we did was commonplace enough—dumping out and rearranging tools, junk, and baggage, getting every pound and ounce

of unnecessary weight out of the plane, filling up the tanks with gasoline and oil, while the mechanics verified every bolt and wire—but there were no electric lights in the vast, black hangar, we did it all with smoky kerosene farm-lanterns, kept safely distant from the gasoline, and with flashlight torches; so that we made (and moved constantly among) monstrous gigantic shadows.

Finally it was all finished, and they dropped me back at the hotel to snatch an hour or two of sleep, as they planned likewise to do. Madame Biscarat had set the alarm clock for three-thirty.

I quote now from Marjorie's notebook:

"We were awakened by the alarm clock, dressed and went into the dim-lit dining-hall, where a black servant was sleepily arranging cups and saucers. I went out into the kitchen to hurry the procedure. A tall form wrapped in a white burnoose was making the coffee. Willie and Captain Wauthier were nervous, principally I think, about leaving me behind. I seemed to have fallen into some sort of calm that was not exactly stupor. Willie and the captain were talking of ultimate arrangements, in case something should happen to them. The Trans-Saharan would transport me from Reggan on up to Algiers, where I could catch a boat. . . .

"The sound of a car driving up to the hotel. Little

Captain Rouxel, in his absurd blue overcoat that comes to his knees and flares, and the two lieutenants, Bézier and Fournas. We piled into the car. I had to sit on Willie's lap. It was cold. I was wearing my leather coat and Willie only his light khaki things. . . . I could keep him warm. . . . I mustn't think of that. I felt the wind, and watched the headlights lighting the dark road. There were a lot of stars. Captain Wauthier talked rapidly to Lieutenant Bézier—altitudes and winds—aviation talk.

"Two mechanics waiting for us at the field. The plane already rolled out of the hangar. Willie arranged the baggage. With all our valises out, it was comparatively simple business. All during our flight the gasoline tank between our seats and the pilot's place had been piled high. Now the only baggage was three burnouses, and a bag of food. Extra food in cans was stored in the compartment behind the chairs. In the cans was pressed turkey (two cans of that) and several boxes of sardines, and two cans of tuna fish, and a macédoine of vegetables, and some concentrated beef extract, a few cans of paté de foie gras, a can of peaches and a can of pineapples. There was a jar of jam and some sweet biscuits that the lieutenant called the Caid had given us when we left Bamako. Captain Wauthier eats chocolate while piloting, but there was no chocolate to be had in Gao.

"A mechanic busied himself with some wires on the left wing. Captain Wauthier jumped in and out of the

pilot's place. Then there was nothing to do but stand around and wait until it grew light enough for them to start.

"We couldn't say much. Willie called me a good girl and I told him I thought it was a grand thing Captain Wauthier was doing. And then that was all. I asked Willie twice, I think, if he was sure he had taken along enough cigarettes. And that made him mad. So it was more natural. We each smoked a dry cigarette with a wax end, and looked at the edge of the sky. There, while above us were still stars against black, a thin ribbon of gray light appeared.

"*'Bon!'* Captain Wauthier shook the hand of Captain Rouxel and of the two lieutenants, and I kissed Willie and Captain Wauthier good-by and said *'Bon succès'* or something like that. And he hopped in front, and Willie jumped in and made fast the doors, and took his place on the empty gasoline tin he had borrowed as a seat so that he could be directly at the Captain's shoulder without crowding him in the monkey-seat. The mechanic gave the propeller a preliminary twist. Captain Wauthier cried, *'Personne!'* *'Personne,'* answered the mechanic, jumping to one side. Then the motor started. I hadn't realized before what a noise it made. It was terrifying. It took some time for the motor to warm up. Through the exhaust flew a jet of fire. Then Captain Wauthier made a sign, two orderlies rushed forward and pulled aside the two tri-

angle blocks before the wheels, and the plane shot forward.

"There was a terrible flurry of sand from the wind made by the propeller, and we all had to turn away our heads. When I could look again, the monoplane was rising in the air . . . so beautifully . . . so gracefully . . . so easily. And Willie and the Captain were on their way to help look for Reginansi, heading north, against the wind, with a warning that the *piste* would probably be covered by sand some of the way.

"And I was on the ground, on African ground, alone. The daylight was coming on fast. I got into the car beside Captain Rouxel and we started back into Gao. Nobody said anything, for which I was grateful. I wanted to cry, like a child who has been left behind when people go off on 'grown-up' business. I was glad to feel any sort of little emotion, because I was so worried for them, so unhappy to be separated from them, that the blood was in my ears and I couldn't catch my breath. Everything before had been little adventure, except the one forced descent in the sand storm."





## PART TWO



## VII

**O**N SUNDAY morning, February 7, at exactly quarter-past eight we sighted from the air the beautiful oasis fortress of In Salah, principal French military post on the northwestern edge of the Hogar, and consequently base for the Reginansi search.

In Salah itself, magnificently watered, with a shallow, lagoon-like lake beside its air field and a hundred and fifty thousand flourishing date-palms, lies in flat desert country, with the towering mountains, peaks, crags, and horrid gorges of the true Hogar off to the southeastward.

We had stopped, after the long flight northward, to fill up with gas and oil again and rest a little at Reggan. There would have been no sense or use in arriving on the scene empty of fuel, worn out, in the black middle of the night.

Even now in the morning, the air field was deserted as we landed, but we had seen from the air a car hurrying out from the fortress, evidently to meet us.

A haggard, nervous Commandant, hollow-eyed, but clean-shaven, and in full uniform with stripes and other

gold insignia which showed him local boss of fort and air field, stepped out of the car and hurried toward us.

"What can I do for you?" he said, like a harassed floor-manager in a department store. "I can't give you any gasoline . . . It's all been requisitioned. . . ."

My Capitaine, who had been glowing, high-tensioned, eager, like a little boy, froze instantly, as cold as ice, stopped in his tracks, snapped to attention, and replied with clipped words that were like German military heel-clicks:

"Wauthier, captain-pilot French Army, technical expert Villa Coublay Airdrome, Paris, now on absence but here under authorization Air Ministry, to put self and plane disposal Colonel Vuillemin, search Reginansi."

The haggard Commandant, who had likewise saluted stiffly instead of shaking hands, hesitated as if to say something friendly and not at all like what he actually did say, which was:

"Well, in that case you've wasted your time and your gasoline. Reginansi's been found."

"When? . . . How? . . ."

The answer came out ungraciously:

"Well, ten minutes ago, just before I left the fort . . . this morning . . . by Colonel Vuillemin . . . They're all three alive. . . ."

Then, suddenly, because the strain was all over now, the haggard local Commandant and my Capitaine

stopped their military barking, snapping at each other, and came to ease like deflated balloons.

"Come on to the club, both of you," said the Commandant, as if we had all known each other on friendly terms but been fed up with each other for years. His name was Estèbe. "There is only a short first bulletin. But Vuillemin has a wireless in his plane. There'll be more bulletins now."

So we got into the car with this fellow whom we had hated and who now proved to be as charming an officer and gentleman as I have ever met (he had been run ragged, frazzled to the breaking point, during the past seven days), rode in through the palm gardens, arrived at the big fortified military compound, surrounded by rose-colored, crenelated mud walls, passed the Arab sentries, and went to the officers' club.

It was likewise deserted, except for the native servants. We had coffee at a table in the bar. Every ten minutes or so a tall, robed, decorated Tuareg interpreter (always the same man) came trotting from the wireless house with new bulletins.

Reginansi, Touge, and Lenier, having been given first aid, juice of fresh oranges and the juice from a can of pineapple, were now aboard the planes of Vuillemin and Poulain, being rushed to Arak, the fort nearest to which they had been found, for medical attention and rest.

The bulletins were coming from the operator aboard Vuillemin's plane, in the air.

The three adventurers, having abandoned their plane and wandered miles in a last desperate search for water, had been sighted and picked up by Colonel Vuillemin in person, accompanied by Poulain in a second plane, in the Erg Tessel Jafi.

They were completely exhausted, but would recover. That was the main thing. They had come through a bad adventure. But they were all right.

Shortly after ten o'clock a bulletin said they were above the mountain of Raz; then above the landing-field at Arak; then that they had landed safely.

All these bulletins were relayed immediately to the Air Ministry in Paris and to the Paris press, which was in a furore of excitement, bombarding Commandant Estèbe with radio requests (also brought to the club table) begging further details.

Later another bulletin came from Vuillemin saying that they had decided to remain the day and night in Arak and would not return to In Salah until the afternoon of the day following.

Wauthier, who had been sitting quiet now that the strain was over, said quietly:

"I'm glad of that."

"Why?" said Estèbe in surprise. "When you've come all this way . . . it was very *chic* what you did . . .

you must excuse my gruffness on the field this morning . . . I should think you'd want to see them all. . . ."

"I'd love to see them all," said Wauthier, "particularly Reginansi . . . you know we were in school together. . . . It isn't that . . . it's foolish maybe . . . but let's consider things a little. When they do come back here, there'll be champagnes of honor, speeches, congratulations, photographs, more dispatches to the Paris press. . . . Well, you see, the fact is"—this with a wan grin—"we got here too late to be in it. We wasted our time and our gasoline, just as you said this morning. And since we came too late to be of any help or use whatever in the search, I feel that it might be lacking in delicacy for us to hang around and participate in the congratulations and rejoicing, even on the edges. I had been thinking that we ought to betake ourselves off at once, go back to Reggan. But I'm awfully tired. As it is now, we can rest the night here and go back in the morning. . . ."

We were all silent. I felt terribly sorry for my sweet, sensitive, gallant little Capitaine. And I knew only too well just how *he* was feeling. Our situation recalled the psychology in certain Conrad novels. Wauthier had volunteered whole-heartedly, heroically had done his best—and had arrived when it was all over. So that behind the deep, sincere relief and joy that Reginansi was safe (that was the thing that really counted), it was no more than



sad human nature for us to have our tails a bit between our legs, to feel ourselves futile.

I think Estèbe was sympathetic with and sorry for Wauthier too. He said finally:

"Perhaps you are right, though I know other good fellows, less delicate, who would insist, under the circumstances, on having a seat at the table. Perhaps you are right just the same. At any rate there's no hurry about it now. You can get a good night's rest. Let's have a drink. You will lunch with me, of course."

Toward the end of the luncheon, there was a roar in the air, and an orderly came to say that two of the planes which had been on the hunt in the Hogar—he had recognized them as the machines of two local lieutenant-pilots—had come back and were landing.

We met them later in the afternoon, and after putting our own plane in readiness for taking off in the early morrow, we dined with Estèbe, in their company, that evening. They were Lieutenants Tellier and Seaux.

The talk was again, of course, exclusively of Regnansi. They were fresh from the scene, in which they had participated, and the intimate conversation, as is always the case at first after a raid, battle, gang war, lynching, shipwreck, or any other desperate adventure, touched in flashes on freak details, trivial but fantastic little human things, close-up high-lights which would

be lost, submerged, perhaps, in the later full, formal narrative.

One thing which had impressed them, and which they told gravely, was that Reginansi and his two companions had burst into tears, sobbing, crying like babies as if their hearts would break, when the planes had landed beside them.

"It was too much for them," said Tellier sentimentally, "tough fellows . . . men all the way through . . . I bet they'd have died, all three of them, with their teeth gritted . . . but to be saved . . . it was too much for them."

They told of how Reginansi's sandals were worn to ribbons . . . how his feet were bleeding . . . all their lips parched and black, their tongues swollen . . . how Reginansi, insisting on going alone, had walked, staggered, crawled, a total of a hundred and forty kilometers (well over a hundred miles) those last four days, searching for water. . . .

That, in a tragic sense, was normal. But there were other incidents so fantastic, so incredible, that no mind could have invented them in a fiction tale of hardship or horror.

Their sending apparatus had gone dead, useless, several days before, but up to the very last their two superb radio receiving sets, one for Morse code and one for the sort of spoken messages, reports, broadcasts, music, which

you receive in your own home, had worked clearly, perfectly.

Three nights before, Lenier had intercepted a strong s.o.s. code message, and jotting it down, croaked, parch-mouthed, hoarsely, to the others, "*Ça y est! I've gone mad!*"

But he hadn't gone mad. The other two men listened. They also knew Morse code. It was a strong, clear message which said:

*"Lenier sending from Reginansi plane. Wireless all right again, but out of water. Come quick. Our newly checked position, latitude, longitude,"* etc.

It was an s.o.s. which would be picked up by all the stations, by Colonel Vuillemin and the searching parties, purporting to go out from Lenier himself, purporting to give their exact position in degrees, minutes, and seconds—and giving it all wrong by several hundred miles!

The mystery behind that cruel, incredible ghost message will perhaps never be solved. Somewhere, probably in Algeria, a criminal, a madman, or a deluded believer in clairvoyance was at the key of a powerful wireless—playing with their lives.

Life sometimes invents mysteries and horrors which surpass the most lurid fiction.

There had been another touch—the talk of wireless reminded Tellier—that was pretty awful too (though in a different and more innocent way), if you stopped to

think what it must really be like to be slowly dying of thirst in the Sahara:

One night, chance atmospheric conditions happening to be clear of all static, they picked up by accident on their other radio the hook-in of a powerful Berlin broadcasting station with a big jazz cabaret. They heard dance music, applause, shrill female laughter, shouts to waiters, almost the popping of champagne corks and the ice tinkling in glasses.

"Well, now they're safe, thank God," interrupted Seaux, the other lieutenant. "They can have champagne now themselves if they want it, and pretty soon they'll be dancing in a cabaret somewhere, laughing and looking like every one else. By my God, what a difference there is—between being even here, as we are, in this lousy African mess hall and being out there alone in that crazy desert, as they were."

Seaux had done quite a lot of Sahara flying, he was no neophyte, but he had brought back a queer, special impression of the Hogar with its bare, perpendicular cliffs, gorges, precipices—an impression which he talked about but found difficult to put into words. Some of the mile-high and two-mile precipices, he said, were so bare, smooth, straight, so geometrical, that they were "like floors tilted at a wrong angle, in a wrong place, just *pretending* to be walls." Flying over and among them, he said, with their shifting lights, shifting color, shifting

positions, one got a hopeless sense of lostness, of being lost—not as Reginansi had been with relation to the points of the compass, but “lost in the three dimensions of space.” It created a “panic fear,” he said, that one might be flying upside down or sideways, a fear which couldn’t be calmed by looking at the spirit levels and instruments on the dashboard, because it was a “nature fear.” As a landscape, he said, it was crazy—and, he added, “there are still people back home who imagine that the whole Sahara Desert is flat!”

“The Sahara has a thousand faces, a thousand aspects,” said Estèbe, who was older, “but what you were saying reminds me of some poetry I read when I first came out here and which I thought then was rot. I can’t remember the lines but it was to the effect that the desert is like a mysterious, voluptuous, smiling woman. She lures you to flirt with her, to conquer her, she allows herself to be conquered if you go about it rightly, she becomes a mistress whom we others, caught for life in her toils, alternately curse and love—but if in trying to woo her you miss your step, you make the least mistake, her smile dissolves, turns into the grin of a death’s-head, of a skull. It’s overwrought, of course, like most poetry, and like the things you were trying to say just now . . . but by God, it’s the Sahara!”

## VIII

SO WE flew back, our plane behaving beautifully but ourselves deflated, with our tails a little bit between our legs, to Bordj Estienne, to the mid-desert fortress-hotel-de-luxe of the Saharan Transport, stuck out in the sand on the edge of the Reggan oasis.

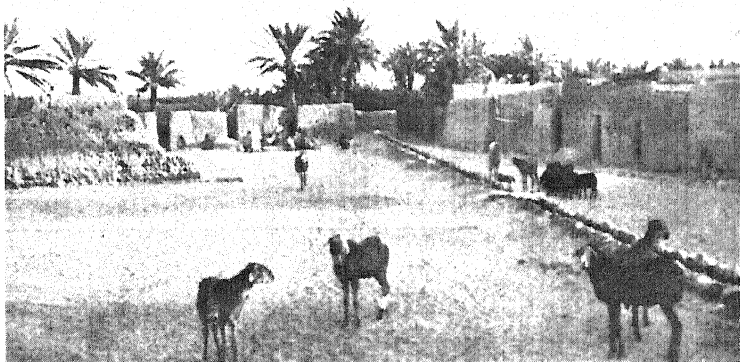
It was Monday, February 8. It was homelike, a relief, familiar. We knew where the washroom was, and the bartender's name (it was merely Abdullah), the hours for meals, and the peculiar temperament of Bauret, the young local manager. Bauret's very cynicism made him sympathetic toward our recent empty exploit. Also he had pleasant news for us. Georges Estienne himself was there. He'd be out in a minute. He had dropped down from Paris to see how things were going. Incidentally, he had taken personal charge of the arrangements for bringing Marjorie up across the desert by truck from Gao. He'd tell us about it.

Bauret was still resplendent in his flowing black silks and bright-colored sandals. He reminded me this time of a young, decadent cardinal in the reign of the Borgias. In a moment appeared Georges Estienne, that is to say,

"the Pope," big boss of the works, founder, president, and director general of the whole Trans-Saharan. He wore baggy tweeds, a golf cap, tan shoes, and an army shirt. He and Wauthier were old friends and buddies. He was a big, muscular fellow, youngish, that is to say in his healthy early forties, with a clean-shaven face that was boyish, friendly, and at the same time hard as granite. Though the son of a French general, he was not Latin; though now a Saharan, he was a man of the north. He suggested very strongly a certain type of American or English empire-builder whom I have met or seen, and admired. I detail these first impressions here, because his character, and the confidence he inspired, played a major rôle in the time sequence of serious events which happened later.

They had their own wireless station, a miniature power-house it was, in an outbuilding off the Bordj, and had just been talking with Gao. Marjorie, Estienne told us, was leaving in a special truck that afternoon. Her driver, he said, was his own chief mechanician from the big Gao garage. They would arrive, therefore, on Wednesday afternoon or evening. No possible chance of a breakdown, for the man was taking his whole tool kit and could fix anything.

So we went into the bar, had a drink, and wondered how we could best amuse ourselves during the three-day wait. "Why don't you visit the neighboring oases?" sug-



*Wide World Photo*

A DESERT AQUEDUCT  
(FOUGARA) EMERGING  
TO THE SURFACE AND  
WATERING AN OASIS

A FOUGARA.  
GEORGE ESTIENNE  
HEAD OF THE TRANS-  
SAHARAN TRANSPORT  
AND SEABROOK EX-  
PLORING A WELL  
WHICH CONNECTS WITH  
SUBTERRANEAN AQUE-  
DUCTS BRINGING WATER  
UNDER THE SAHARA  
FROM THE HOGAR TO  
THE REGGAN OASIS



*Wide World Photo*





*Wide World Photo*

CORPORAL DENIS, SOLE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE FAMOUS  
"CAMEL CORPS" AT REGGAN

gested Estienne. "They're interesting in their way . . . three or four of them within a few miles. . . . I'll get you up some donkeys . . . they'll be a change after the plane. . . ."

"I prefer the plane," said Wauthier. "I loathe horses . . . but maybe donkeys will be different."

An oasis—in common with the Sahara itself, despite anachronisms—is one of the few things in the world which is 100 per cent "as advertised," which lives absolutely up to its reputation, to the conventional, preconceived, rotogravure or illustrated-children's-book idea which you have of it. New York and a whale do not; neither does "Miss Europe" or "Miss America," or the most beautiful woman in the world; neither do snails the first time you eat them, nor cathedrals. A camel, by the way, does. And in this respect camels and oases are similar. A camel, or an oasis with its pools, robed Arabs, and date-palm groves (it occurred to me childishly as we ambled into this one on our donkeys) look in reality exactly as they look on cigarette wrappers, on the colored tops of boxes of dates in the delicatessen store—exactly as they are represented in old romantic woodcuts or bad modern lithographs.

We made a lot of photographs—which must be a suc-

cess, since they look that way too. They look just like pictures from an old illustrated family Bible.

However, about this particular oasis, in common with the others of the same group and with all the flat mid-Saharan oases we had flown over, there was a mechanical detail which puzzled me—which had puzzled me from the air, and still did.

Looking down on them from the air, one saw leading to them across the sand long lines of what looked like pimples, or ringworms, in the sand itself, symmetrically spaced. Some of the oases would have several of these lines leading out across the bare flats. They looked so much like pimples that I wondered if they were sand eruptions of some sort, accidents of nature, though their regularity indicated that they might be the work of man.

Now, examining them close up as we returned to the Bordj on our donkeys, stopping to poke at them and sit on them, they were still like eruptions on the human skin, exactly like boils with the core removed, spaced in a long line at intervals of about every forty feet; they were a yard or more in diameter and a couple of feet high—little stopped-up craters of sand, like extinct baby volcanoes. Just the same, they were evidently man-made, to serve a purpose. The lines of them stretched for miles out over the bare desert.

Astraddle our ridiculous plodding little donkeys, no saddles, a barefoot boy to beat them, and our own feet

dangling almost in the sand, we arrived back at the Bordj.

Estienne had been talking again with Gao. Marjorie had gotten off all right in the truck, he told us, according to prearranged schedule. I wasn't thinking about Marjorie. I wanted to know about those pimples in the sand.

He explained that they were manholes, sealed with clay and rocks, but easy to open, spaced at close intervals to clean out the subterranean aqueducts, like sewers, he said, except that they ran pure, clear water—bringing down water for the oases from the hills and mountains of the Hogar, many miles away. Who had achieved that fantastic engineering feat? They had now several times a year to be worked on, cleaned out, redug where they caved in, by all the available farmers who could be requisitioned under orders of the “chief mason” of the oasis, but they had been dug originally centuries ago, long before white Europeans had appeared, probably before the Moslems. . . .

This information surprised me, for I had supposed that all oases, like those I had known in the Arabian desert, were beautiful, natural gifts of God to lazy, thirsty, wandering, combative Arabs, with repressed desires for shade, gardening, and peace—gushing wells or springs that bubbled up from the sand spontaneously, or by a miracle of Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Now there are, in the world, spontaneous oases like

that. There is Damascus, so perfect a green fountained paradise that Mahomet (all religious fanatics love to suffer) refused to enter it for the same reason Moses never entered Canaan, the Promised Land. There are also, I believe, Biskra and Touggourt, though I have never visited them. But here, in mid-Sahara, so we were learning now, it was a different story. These date-palm farmers, in their classic robes, in their exotic, far-off, seeming paradise which looked like the colored lithographs in a delicatessen store or in the old Tissaud plates in the family Bible, were having really just as hard a time of it as the stony-ground farmers in familiar bleak New England, or the harassed hard-working irrigation farmer in arid Mid-Western States.

I wondered again, thinking back to Damascus the Blessed—a thing which I have often wondered—why, when there are places in the world like the Golden Isles of the Hyères, like Provence, like Haiti, like Tahiti, like the best of Florida and California, where you pretend to work lackadaisically a few months in the year but most of the time loaf on your back and let fruit drop off the trees into your mouth—why anybody who depends on the coöperation of nature for his livelihood or who, to put it bluntly, loves laziness, should remain struggling his horny-handed life through, like the proverbial North Georgia constipated jay bird, on barren or “stony” ground.

But maybe all this is based on delusion. Maybe, as Gauguin found long ago in the South Sea Isles, all seeming terrestrial paradises have their disadvantages, their "tricks," their hard-labor disillusionments. Maybe their glamour is merely the far-off, the unknown, the untried. Perhaps the only real paradise is Beulah Land. Many have emigrated there. But perhaps the only reason Beulah Land retains its glamour is that nobody has ever really come back to give us the low-down about it.

Estienne was meanwhile telling me quite a lot, everything in fact, about the "trick" in this particular little green lovely paradise—the back-breaking labor in darkness under the hot sands, the subterranean aqueducts, *fougara*s they were called in Arabic.

"By the way," he said, "since you seem so interested . . . how would you like to go down in a *fougara* . . . I've been down a couple of times . . . and see what it's like for yourselves?"

"Not I," protested Wauthier hastily. "I like the Sahara from above, and I don't mind it occasionally on the surface, but I'm not going under it. Besides," he added with a grin, "it would be undignified for an officer-pilot of the French army. You'll get wet and dirty."

"How about you?" said Estienne. "You will get dirty, you know."

I said, "Would you come along?"

"Sure," he said. "I'll send a boy tonight or tomorrow to get the mason to come and open up one of the holes."

Next morning when I appeared at table for early breakfast, Estienne was already there, half through. He was in a bathrobe, apparently naked underneath except for a breechclout.

"He's out there," he said, ". . . the mason, opening up one of the holes. He's brought rope and everything. You'd better take off all your clothes except a pair of trunks or shorts. We'll go while it's cool, as soon as you have finished your coffee."

I was caught—in a way. I didn't want to go down—at least not that morning. I wanted to talk about it for a while first, and maybe go down later. I guess, in our easy informality, I had forgotten who Georges Estienne was. What he planned, even casually, he carried out.

Wauthier came in to breakfast, after I had stripped. "You're a pair of idiots," he said. . . . "Wait till I get my camera." Bauret likewise came in and had his say, more grinning and cynical than ever.

Abdullah the bartender and Hadj the cook came also, and followed us, carrying an iron acetylene miner's lantern, extra rope, towels; whispering, pointing at me, nudging each other and giggling.

"You see, Willie," said Wauthier, "give it up, it's not your trade—they're already making sport of you."

But with Estienne striding along ahead, it was not so easy to give it up. I wished, however, that I had never mentioned the *fougaras* at all. I wished I was elsewhere. I don't like going down into dark holes. I don't like squeezing through subterranean passages. I'm both big and awkward. I require a lot of room.

The manhole which the mason had opened—he seemed to have chosen one at random about a quarter of a mile from the Bordj—was like an abandoned well or an extremely narrow mine-shaft. I peered down with misgivings. It dropped into blackness. Since the sun was not yet nearly overhead, you couldn't see the bottom. But you could hear a faint rippling of water. They slid a rope down, with cook, bartender, Capitaine, Bauret, and the mason all braced to hold it. Estienne went first, telling me that when I followed it would be easiest to cling to the rope with only one hand, pushing out feet and elbows against the wall, using my free hand, easing down gradually.

As he did it, I heard dislodged stones and chunks of clay plopping into water. My eyes getting accustomed, I could see that he was about thirty feet beneath the surface of the desert and knee-deep in running water. The mason let down the lighted lantern to him, on a cord, and he disappeared with it, bending, into a lateral passage.



There was nothing for it. I had to follow him. I was nervous, and being naturally awkward, I slipped and jammed several times, scraped a lot of skin off my back, knees, and elbows, finally got to the bottom. The water was warm and extremely muddy. It wasn't knee-deep. It was only about a foot deep. It flowed in a narrow, lateral tunnel, waist-high and just wide enough for a man to crawl through. Estienne, holding the lantern in front of his face with one hand, started crawling, splashing like a three-legged dog, upstream. I bent down and followed him, on all fours. It was so narrow that my shoulders often squeezed against the sides, so low that my head often bumped. I wondered how in the name of God we were going to turn around and get back. His lantern made it bright. The tunnel was not propped up with stone or timber; it ran through good tough greasy clay. I learned that day something which I suppose is commonplace knowledge to all geologists, but which I had never thought about, that the great sand desert, the mid-Sahara, while comparable in expanse to the ocean, is most decidedly not deep like the ocean. In fact it isn't deep at all. The Great Sahara is merely surface sand. Dig down in most places, around Reggan here for instance, or in the Tanesruft, and you come to good clay or earth before you've gone ten feet. I don't know what this proves—if anything—but it surprised me.

We must have crawled about fifty feet when the tun-

nel widened slightly. We were under another *fougara*, another manhole hermetically sealed at the top. Estienne repeated that twice a year all these manholes were successively opened, while the workers, crawling along between them, cleaned out the channel with their hands, depositing the mud in baskets which were drawn up through the manholes. They worked without lamps, he said, in darkness in the tunnels, since they needed the use of both hands.

Commandant Estèbe had said, "The Sahara has a thousand faces." This was a queer one we were seeing now. We were seeing it "under the skin" as it were, and it was proving, like the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady, to be common clay.

We had been crawling through water muddied by our own movements, opaque yellow. But now as we stood, the water soon began to flow past our feet and legs as clear as crystal. I tasted some of it. It was sweet water from the hills. No fear in these regions of typhoid or dysentery. Estienne's carbide lantern sputtered. But he had a box of matches, wrapped in oilcloth and tied with a string on the back of his neck. So we crawled further along the tunnel, a quarter of a mile or more, and then were sorry, for it was alike everywhere, and the trip returning seemed interminable. Finally we saw a streak of daylight trickling down far ahead, from our opened *fougara*. When we reached it, there was Wauthier, leaning

over, peering down, bleating plaintively, "Willie! Willie!" Being accustomed to circulating in the whole free sky, this seemed to him more risky, foolhardy, than flying. "You were a long time," he called down. "I thought maybe the desert had caved in on you."

I had been bothered for fear climbing out would be harder than sliding down. It was much easier. There were little footholds, notches, which I had missed. They pulled us over the top into the sunshine. We were covered with mud, thick yellow clay like wet paint. Wauthier insulted us affectionately and snapped photographs. The Arabs were delighted.

Returning to the Bordj, Bauret produced a famous bottle of marc, which is a fiery liquor distilled from the lees of grapes. Dumesnil, the French Air Minister, had brought it as a gift to Estienne from his own private vineyards some years before. They had pasted a vertical strip of paper down the side of the bottle, which was half-empty. It was only touched on special occasions, and each occasion was inscribed on the paper with a mark to show the liquor's reduced level and the names of the imbibers. Bauret thought, mockingly, that this was an occasion. So after we had washed the mud and clay off us in the shower, we diminished the level by a couple of inches and he inscribed it.

I said: "Tell me, Estienne, that steady flow of water comes from somewhere. Why don't these Arabs emigrate

to its source and make a new oasis instead of going through all that semiannual hard labor of cleaning the tunnel? Why didn't the fellows centuries ago build their original oasis at the source instead of leading the water way down here into the barren flats?"

"There is no source," said Estienne. "These aqueducts run for a couple of hundred miles or more into the equally barren Hogar hills, where they pick up, all along the way, the drainage and seepage from thousands of little irregular subterranean trickles, none of which is big enough to amount to anything. If you explored all the way to the head of the aqueduct, you wouldn't find a lake or a dam. You'd find the head of the tunnel dry, or merely moist."

So what it came to was that centuries before European Mediterranean civilization had ever touched them, these mid-desert people had planned and executed feats of engineering which could in their different manner and with different problems, different material, be compared, both in conception and in execution, to the aqueducts of the Romans, to our own modern aqueducts which bring water down from the Croton through Westchester to New York. In fact their problem was even harder. And while the great Roman aqueducts are ruins, these in the desert have withstood the test of time.

## IX

THE ANCIENT facts about the subterranean desert aqueducts—much more than our own little adventure in them—had interested us so keenly that at dinner we asked Bauret and Estienne if there were anything else of the sort worth visiting in the neighborhood. “No,” they said, . . . “but wait a minute . . .” There was nothing here in the flats, among the oases, but there was what seemed to be an old ruined castle not far away on a cliff in the Hogar foothills. You couldn’t quite see it from here, but you could see it from the neighboring oasis of Taowirt. Neither of them had ever climbed up to it, though they had often talked of doing so, but if we wanted to get up early in the morning we could make it in a day, on the donkeys.

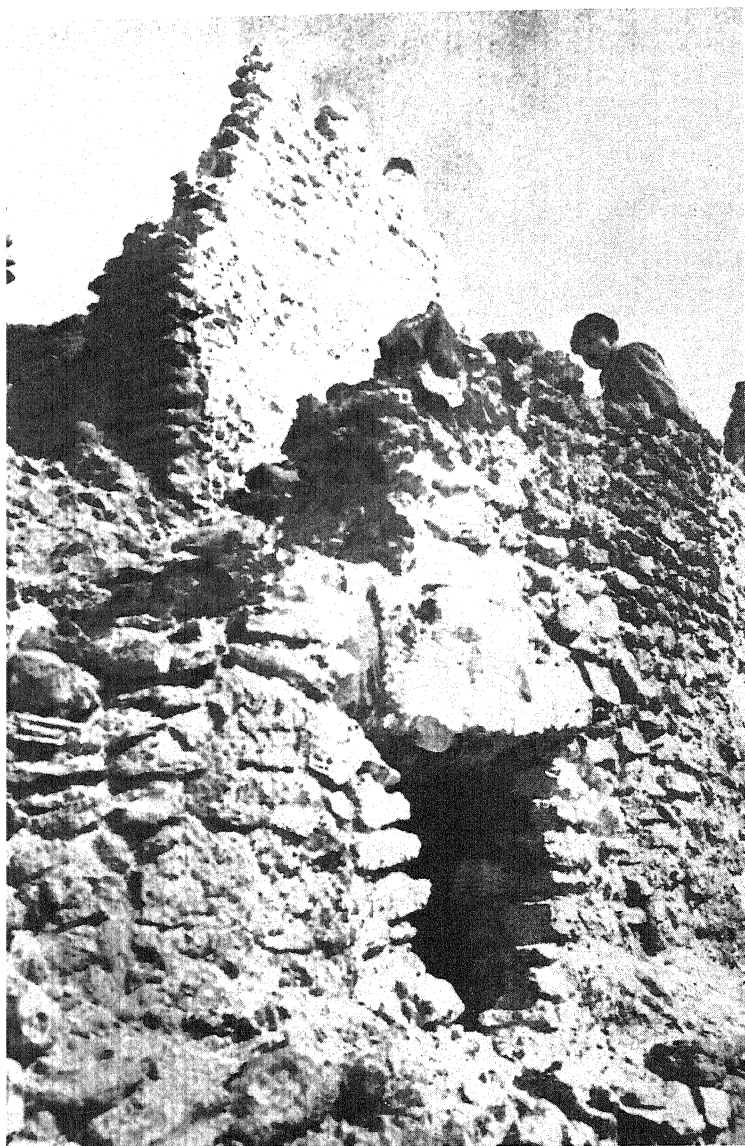
A castle in the Hogar! Shades of Antinéa and the *Atlantide*! Sure, we wanted to go. So we called in Hadj the cook, had him fix us a picnic lunch, went to bed early, and got up the next morning before daybreak, as we had done so many mornings, although this time it was to be donkeys instead of an airplane.

Ambling on the donkeys in the red, desert dawn, skirt-



*Wide World Photo*

AN ANCIENT PRE-MOSLEM CHÂTEAU-FORT IN THE EDGE OF THE HOGAR MOUNTAINS; WHITE SPOTS AND WHITEWASHED PILLARS SEEMING TO BE THE TEMPLE OF A MODERN PHALLIC CULT INSTALLED IN THE RUINS



*Wide World Photo*

DETAIL OF ANCIENT PRE-MOSLEM CHÂTEAU-FORT

ing Taowirt, we had our first glimpse of the castle. It looked at first like a trick of nature, as if time and erosion had modeled a mock fortress on the cliff top, out of the living rock. But as the sun lighted it more brilliantly we could see that it was built with hands, the ruins of a once mighty castle-fortress dominating the plain. It looked like a reduced clay model of Carcassonne, or like a fortified Italian hill town fallen into decay.

Climbing up was slow and difficult. We finally had to dismount and lead the donkeys. We clambered over a breach in the ancient outer walls and soon were lost in a pyramided labyrinth of now roofless chambers and winding passages. The walls were of stone and clay. There was what seemed to have been a banquet hall, there were numberless rooms once perhaps bedchambers, others which seemed to have been prisons or dungeons. Wandering about among them, sometimes taking opposite directions, we had to shout to each other.

Wauthier, whose hobby is desert archeology, was sure that the castle was pre-Moslem, perhaps even prehistoric, like the Maya ruins in Central America. It overhung the cliff, dominating the desert westward, but behind it was a plateau where we found great broken trunks of trees, completely fossilized—not palm trees, but real trees with knot holes and grain in concentric circles, like chestnut or oak. "But see," said Wauthier, "this castle once stood beside a grove of trees now turned to stone! There must



have been water here, but when and how? There are fossilized trees like that in many places in the Sahara. The hypothesis of the specialists is probably true, you know. There must have been a time in the dim past when the Sahara was not a desert."

"The Lost Continent," I said. "The lost Atlantis."

"Oh, that of course is fiction," he replied, "but if Antinéa had ever actually existed this might well have been her castle. I've read most of the books on desert archeology and I don't think this ruin is mentioned in any of them. It's been overlooked, maybe just because it's so close to the trail. But it's queer.

"Do you know it's queer also," he said, "about Benoît. I'm told that Benoît has never visited the Hogar, yet Meharists, Camel Corps officers who have spent years in the Hogar, say that whatever anybody may think about the wild plot of his novel, or the movie versions that deluged the world afterward, his description of the Hogar itself, its topography, customs, flora, fauna, everything, is the best and most accurate that has ever been written by anybody. And by a man who had never been there! He must have done an enormous amount of study before he started to write."

This was the longest speech I had ever heard my Capitaine make on any subject other than girls or flying. Surprised at himself for talking literature and somewhat out of breath, he turned and began digging, with a little

spade he had bought, in the floor of one of the chambers. We found none of Antinéa's jewels, but presently having wandered off again by himself, he shouted back at me, "*Il y a quelquechose quand même*"—"There's something here just the same."

There was indeed *quelquechose*, something wholly unexpected. He had clambered down over the walls on the south side where the ruins sloped, and had found, built against them, looking out over the plain below, a modern parapet, neatly whitewashed, on which three round whitewashed pillars stood, each surmounted by an inverted clay bowl, stuck on it like a derby hat. Behind the parapet, built into the wall, was a big niche in which stood by way of statue another tall white pillar modeled anatomically, with a flat stone table before it, neat, modern, whitewashed, and both stained with recent blood.

This time it was my turn to explain, but I could hardly believe my eyes to find it in mid-Sahara, and adjacent at that to three big orthodox Moslem oases. Poor Captain Weymel would have been happy. It was precisely the triple altar of the phallic worshipers, of that strange surviving cult, pre-Moslem, pre-Christian, pre-Hebrew, which continues to worship Amma—symbol of the male principle in creation, who, by a theology which antedates all Christian conceptions of a Trinity, is yet mysteriously Three in One.

I had encountered Amma-worshipers three years be-

fore, in the cliffs east of Bandiagara, had studied their doctrines, had even visited their Black Pope, who lives on a mountain top and is said to be the holiest man in the world—but here the obvious symbolism went further than anything I had ever seen on the altars of Ireli or Sangha. For here the inverted bowl, representing the female organ of fecundity, was placed directly on the male organ, the erect phallus—representing the act itself. Otherwise, the altar arrangement was identical with those of Sangha, and judging by the recent blood, the rites here were the same, lambs, sheep, goats, slain on the altar stone, and their blood sprinkled in libation. There were earthen cups on the parapet floor with blood in them not quite dried.

I thought of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Mount Sinai, Bethel, and Mount Carmel, the blood-sacrifice stories of our own Holy Writ. Here still, in the year 1932, survived an altar for the slaying in sacrifice of horned beasts, on a great height looking down over the great desert. Who tended it? we wondered. Who were its high priests and worshipers? Probably, at intervals, or when the crops went bad, all the good Babbitt-like Moslems of the neighboring oases—believing in the Mercy of Allah, saying their prayers regularly, but playing safe just the same by magical recourse to the elder gods, to the ancient and eternal pagan nature-mysteries.

It couldn't have been a secret or persecuted or esoteric

cult, for here it was on a height, in the open. You could see its gleaming whitewash for miles from the plain. Yet when we returned to Reggan and questioned various farmers of the oasis, they said, "No, we don't know anything about it."

I recalled the witchcraft murder trial in Pennsylvania and whispered gossip around the kitchen table of a farm one winter night in Connecticut. I wondered what certain good Babbitt-like farmers in the Pennsylvania Dutch belt, or in the stony hills of New England, might tell—if they had a mind to.

Descending towards the oasis of Taowirt, after our picnic lunch among the ruins, we saw movement and excitement in the plain below. We encountered presently a small band of Tuaregs mounted on camels, veiled, with their long two-handed Crusader swords and two or three rifles, accompanied by black Bellah slaves on foot who were driving helter-skelter before them a big flock of frightened sheep. They neither saluted nor noticed us. A quarter of a mile further along we came on a queer straggler scene. A single Tuareg of the band, with two camels, one in leash, and two Bellah slaves to aid him, both camels kneeling in the sand, was struggling with an immense, fat, pregnant, bleating mother of many lambs—big as a half-grown calf, she was—to tie her on top of

the pack camel. She had evidently broken the cords and fallen off. Now she kept sliding, slipping, struggling, while they cursed and tugged. It was such an enticing sight that we stopped. They were so angry, so busy, that they refused our cigarettes and didn't give a damn whether we snapped photographs or not.

There was noise from Taowirt, so we ambled on, and found the oasis in a howling uproar. A hundred or more farmers with their headmen were milling about, gesticulating, weeping, shouting, in the market place. We dismounted and pushed into the crowd. In its center were three Tuaregs, one of them a chief, gesticulating and orating, too, waving their swords.

Although Wauthier knew Arabic better than I, they were all yelling so loudly and so fast that we couldn't make head or tail of it. We saw some old men sitting outside the crowd, against a wall, and went over toward them.

"It looks as if we may have run into a raid," said Wauthier, "but it would surprise me—here."

The day of Tuareg massacres, of course, has long since passed. The only Tuaregs who come now with dubious intent into this part of the desert are occasional skulking night marauders, roaming bands of common thieves, more despised than feared. But whatever this might be, it was happening in broad daylight. And it looked per-

fectly grand. It couldn't have been better staged by Morris Gest at the Century.

We listened now to the quartet of the graybeards against the wall.

"Yes," they moaned, "they are the sons of evil, and this is an evil day. They are the despoilers of the peaceful, of the shepherd and the farmer. They are the black-veiled devils who bring death with the iron sword. Woe to us, and woe to Taowirt!"

This, while eloquent, was too poetically vague for my Capitaine. And besides, the three Tuaregs in the market place, while waving their "iron swords," seemed to be waving them oratorically.

"Cease," he said to the quartet of graybeards, "and answer me. Is it a *rhazzu*, then—a raid?"

"Ah, yes," moaned the basso, "we have been robbed, despoiled."

"I don't believe it," said Wauthier. "Has anybody been murdered? Has any one been wounded, or even scratched?"

"Ah," said the tenor, "blood will flow, unless the Camel Corps, our white protectors, arrive in time."

"If it be the will of Allah," groaned the baritone.

"Bah," said Wauthier, as he sat down beside them against the wall and lighted a cigarette.

A few minutes later the Camel Corps did actually arrive, though without bugles, pennons, clouds of dust, or

lances. It consisted of Corporal Denis, a short stocky red-cheeked little Frenchman, sole white representative of law and order at Reggan. He was armed, so far as we could make out, only with a fine stream of Arab profanity and an Eastman kodak. But just the same, he *was* the Camel Corps, that is, the sovereign local representative of the Meharists, the far-flung, oft-sung (and oftener filmed) colorful mounted police of the desert.

Shorter in stature than most of the Arabs, he elbowed his way, swearing and sweating, into the center of the crowd, disengaged the three Tuareg "sons of evil," who seemed mightily content at his arrival, led them off to one side, shooed back the mob and yelled for the Caid, that is, the mayor of Taowirt. We joined them to hear the low-down.

"Now what the hell is all this about?" demanded Corporal Denis of the Camel Corps—or words to that effect in profaner Arabic. He made the Tuareg chief talk first, and the Caid afterward.

It was more or less as Wauthier had suspected. The whole howling riot, with an entire oasis in tumult and veiled mysterious Tuaregs waving their great two-handed swords, had nothing more at bottom than a squabble over prices in a pushcart market on First Avenue. The difference which they couldn't agree on amounted to the equivalent of some \$2.30 in American money. The Tuaregs, who were itinerant merchants, had bought a flock of sheep

at Taowirt which they were taking to sell at Aouleff. The row had occurred over the counting of the sheep, and the Tuaregs, losing precious time, since they had to reach a well by nightfall, and being high-tempered fellows if not bandits, had finally sent the flock ahead in disgust, and left their chief behind to settle the argument.

Corporal Denis scratched his head. The chief was there with his leather money-bag. But the sheep were gone and couldn't be recounted.

"You sent the flock off without reaching an agreement about paying," said Denis after cogitation. "I guess I'll have to arrest you technically. And since the Caid here is the offended party, it will have to come before Caid Hassan." (The grand Caid at Reggan, overlord of the whole oasis group.) "It's too late to do anything to-day. Camp where you like and come to see me in the morning."

As we were leaving, the Caid pointed to Wauthier and me and said something in dialect to Denis. "He invites you to have formal tea with him tomorrow afternoon," Denis explained.

We remembered that Marjorie was due the following evening, but Estienne had told us that she would only arrive at or after nightfall. We looked at each other, nodded. "Why not?" said Capitaine. "*Barika*—Thanks, we'll be delighted."



As we ambled back across the sand to Reggan, the corporal towering on his camel and we on our little donkeys like porpoises accompanying this not very majestic "ship of the desert," Wauthier, who had a mixture of admiration and contempt for my particular trade in life, said:

"Well, I suppose now you'll write a piece about how you saw a Tuareg raid, like all the rest of you fellows. It makes sure-fire copy."

"Like the horrors of Bidon 5," I said. "If I do, I'll write it to suit myself. I don't tell you how to run your taxi."

There was news for us at the Bordj. Estienne had been talking with Tabancort, the last desert military outpost north of Gao, where there was a little mud fort and wireless. Marjorie and her driver had slept the night there, and had left in fine shape at dawn. She was wearing pants, the operator had added, seemed to be enjoying herself, and had given him a pack of cigarettes.

"They'll sleep at Bidon 5 tonight if they want to," said Estienne, "and should arrive here tomorrow night, but maybe a little late for dinner."

"O.K.," said Capitaine (pronounced o-KAH, a quaint French slang expression which they attribute in origin to Fenimore Cooper's redskins). "We're invited for tea at

Taowirt, anyway, at the Caid's. Maybe you can put back dinner for all of us."

"But look here," cut in Bauret, "that reminds me. You can't go. You're invited to tea at Reggan also, by the Grand Caid Hassan. He sent his son over. You've evidently made a social hit, on your donkeys."

"But we've promised the Caid at Taowirt," said Wauthier.

"Can't help it," said Bauret. "Hassan is as ugly as an old camel, but he's more important. Send your excuses to Taowirt—say you've got a headache."

"My God!" said Wauthier. "What's the use of having come to the Sahara? It's like the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Madame la Duchesse Tel is an ugly old camel, too, but when she invites you to lunch you have to break previous engagements and go. Fine freedom you have out here. Your Sahara's just a suburb of Paris."

"Shut up!" said Bauret. "I can't help it."

# X

THE CAID HASSAN received us on a great rug spread beneath palm trees in his garden. He was robed in white and scarlet silk with gold embroidery and tassels, but despite his peacock finery he was, as Bauret had remarked, "as ugly as an old camel." He was thin, tall, yellow-skinned, and had long, yellow, decayed horse-teeth with lips that didn't cover his gums.

He received us with cordiality and honors, though he had other distinguished guests, some of whom we recognized. The Camel Corps was there in the person of Corporal Denis, and there were three other gentlemen whom we also recognized despite the fact that their chins, mouths, and noses were black-veiled to the eyes. They were the "sons of evil, the devils who brought death with the iron sword," to wit, the Tuareg merchant and his two companions whom Denis had "technically" arrested the day before. They were squatting in a place of honor on the rug, smoking cigarettes and picking their teeth.

The tea was also graced by a lady, which is unusual at such Arab functions. Furthermore, she was young and pretty. If you looked at her sideways, casually, you

guessed her to be an English tourist, the wife or daughter of a retired colonel, since she was wearing a white helmet, white blouse, white starched piqué skirt so pulled in at the waist and belted in the style of 1900 that you suspected she had a tight-laced corset beneath it. But if you looked at her straight in the face, you realized at once by the tattoo markings on her chin that she was an Ouled Nail, a daughter of that small Algerian tribe which has become famous in fact and fiction because of the beauty of its women, and even more because of its highly special system of morals and economics.

All daughters of the Ouled Nail are trained from childhood to become expert professional musicians, dancers, and prostitutes. At sixteen or seventeen they go out into the world, ranging throughout the Arab Mediterranean countries, Algeria itself, Morocco, Egypt, Tripoli, Syria—I have encountered them as far from home as Baghdad, but never one dressed like this—plying with embellishments of lute and dance their lucrative triple profession, which, if not the most modernly respectable, has been referred to as the oldest profession in the world.

They continue, however, only through the bloom of youth, only until they have become mature. During those years they convert all their earnings into gold coins, which they have soldered on chains (piercing them would be a needless loss) and which they wear as bracelets, as necklaces, and sometimes as fillets on their foreheads.

When they have garnered enough gold coins, they return to their tribe, contract honorable marriages with members of the tribe, and propagate other little Ouled Nails to carry on the Labor of the Lord.

Our present lady, though young, curved, and pretty, extremely "pneumatic," to borrow a word from my neighbor Aldous Huxley, thus eminently suited to her social and hereditary profession, was apparently a deserter. She had neither gold coins nor a lute, nor did she offer to divert us. Her only jewelry (alas for this decadent age in which the good old customs and traditions are gradually dying out even in the desert!) was a nickel-plated wrist watch. She was evidently the domestic property of Corporal Denis—doubtless did his cooking and washing like any Christian corporal's wedded wife back home. It was rather a pity from all points of view, for despite her idiotic sun-helmet in the shade and ridiculous store-bought European clothes, she was damnably handsome.

The Caid Hassan's eldest son made tea over a Swedish gasoline lamp, breaking lumps of bar sugar with a beautiful little silver hammer whose handle was gold-incrusted with Arabic inscriptions. He wiped his nose on the hem of his robe, and wiped out the cups with his thumb. The Tuareg chief and his two companions lowered their blue-black indigo veils, turning their faces aside, to sip the tea. The first brewing, with the sugar cooked in with the leaves, was sickeningly sweet, and as they were brew-

ing again I asked if I might have some without any sugar at all. Caid Hassan patted me on the shoulder and said that pure tea was more cooling and refreshing. So we all had some without sugar, and it was very good.

We returned to the Bordj at sunset and decided to install ourselves on the high terrace-roof in the cool of the evening to watch for Marjorie's arrival. Estienne told us that we might see clouds of dust, sand dust made by the rolling truck, long before the truck appeared over the rim of the horizon. You could sometimes spot a car coming, he said, two or three hours before it appeared—little moving sand clouds by day, or the reflected glow of the headlights in the sky by night. He would be surprised, he said, if they arrived before eight-thirty or nine, but he had ordered dinner to be kept waiting.

Abdullah brought chairs, a table, drinks, cigarettes, up on the roof and we ensconced ourselves. Estienne left us and went down to the wireless room—some freight business with Colomb-Bechar. We were happy, excited—and for no reason at all a little nervous. We smoked many cigarettes, and strained our eyes toward the southern horizon. . . .

Dusk fell, then darkness, then stars glittered in the velvet night. At eight-thirty Estienne came up, stood staring for five minutes, then called down to Abdullah, who brought him a pair of night glasses, binoculars. Through them he studied the horizon.

"Well, in that case," he said, "they'll hardly arrive before midnight. We might as well go down and have dinner—and if there's no sign after dinner you might as well go to bed, if you feel like it. I'll put a man here on the roof, and he'll awaken you at least a couple of hours before they arrive at the Bordj."

We were so silent at dinner that Estienne said: "Listen, don't worry yourselves needlessly. It's perfectly normal. They may have been held up by spots of soft sand, or they may have had a series of blow-outs—they sometimes happen like freak sequences in a card game—but they'll be along. Forget it."

"You didn't hear anything from Bidon 5 today?" asked Wauthier. (There was a sending machine at Bidon 5, without batteries or power, in one of the dismantled busses. Passers-by in truck or plane could sometimes send messages by hooking up their own batteries to it.)

"No," said Estienne, "but that's normal too. We don't put any dependence on that old machine. I doubt if they even tried to send anything through."

Dinner dragged to its end, and we went up to the roof again. There was the watchman, an Arab swathed and hooded against the night cold, standing so that he wouldn't go to sleep. He stood there like a statue. He didn't speak. He didn't turn to glance at us. He was so motionless that I wondered if he had gone to sleep on his feet as sentinels sometimes do in wartime. I poked

my head close around in front of him. His eyes were open. Perhaps guessing why I did it, he smiled. Estienne and Bauret had gone to bed. At about midnight we went down and went to bed too.

I eventually went to sleep, a sort of restless dozing at first, but finally deep down into the black well of it. When I awoke, there was bright sunlight on the wall.

Estienne and Bauret were in the dining-room. It was nearly eight o'clock. Also Wauthier, who had been up and had his coffee before the dawn. Of a more high-strung, nervous temperament than I, he hadn't been able to sleep at all.

"I tell you honestly, and you must believe me," said Estienne, "that there's no cause to worry—yet. They had some sort of delay, and if they saw last night that they couldn't make Reggan, it would have been natural for them to camp again, sleep, and come this morning. If they don't arrive by this afternoon, it becomes a different story. We'll talk about that later—if necessary. If you see anything coming from the south, it will be they. I've been talking with both Gao and Tabancort this morning, and there are no other cars on the trail."

We went up on the roof again. There was another watchman there, replacing the Arab who had spent the night. It got intolerably hot, and we came down. The day dragged through. A little before sundown, Estienne called us into his office. It was an office seldom used; a flat-



topped desk, dusty, with chairs as if for the monthly meeting of the board. We filed in like a small board of directors, or like undertakers. There were only three of us. Bauret was not there. We sat down. We stayed there for more than an hour. Except that there were only three of us, it was like a meeting of the General Staff, in miniature, at a bad moment behind Verdun. Estienne came out of it commander in chief.

He began by saying: "Something unforeseen has happened. I don't know what, but I imagine they have gotten off the trail. With my chief mechanic driving, and his tool kit beside him, that truck couldn't be broken down. And it's not the season to be mired up in sand—not on our hard trail. In my opinion, they've missed the trail somewhere."

We didn't say anything. Estienne continued:

"The Sahara is not a boulevard or a back yard. It's a little bit like the ocean. We've got a passenger and freight line running across it. Generally our time schedules stand up as well as those of any transatlantic boat line. But unlike most of the ocean lines, we have never lost a passenger. We've had casualties among ourselves—you know about my brother René—but we've never lost a passenger. Another thing which I can safely assure you of, there's no question of life or death involved in this case now. That truck has got aboard it not only the normal supply of water, wine, and food for the normal trip, but a

reserve supply of water in a metal tank for at least ten days, and extra canned food for almost as long. In the back of it, probably, though I couldn't swear to it, among the gasoline tins and extra tires, there's a gunny sack half full of dates. But I can just about swear to the rest. It's in the rules."

He stopped for a moment, and then said, as if to himself:

"If any man of mine started across the desert without his reserve water, I'd have him fired, I'd have him beaten, I'd want to kill him."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Wauthier. "We can take off tonight by the stars, or at dawn, to start looking for them."

"That's what I brought you in here for," said Estienne. "I admit that something has happened. And without insisting, I want to ask you to let me handle it. If I believed they were broken down on the trail, I'd let you go in a minute. But I believe they're off the trail, and how far off it, or where, nobody can guess. One airplane, without a land base, without aviation trucks following it to establish bases, without its own radio apparatus and operator aboard, would be useless looking for one truck lost God knows where, maybe in the Tanesruft, maybe between here and Bidon 5. What I propose is this—and you will remember that unless there is something special involved, a woman in this case, and your own hurry to be

on your way, it's normal to give anybody a three-day margin before setting up a yell, before calling out the army.

"So what I propose is this. Bauret knows the desert, its marks, its traces, as a bush Negro knows the forest. I am going to send him down the trail with another truck. He'll leave a little before dawn, and with any sort of luck, he'll pick up their traces where they left the trail and find them. I'll also talk with Tabancort again, and if there's a truck which they will lend us, we'll send it out in the morning, working up from the south. I ask you to let me handle it. I ask you for exactly three days. If they haven't been found at the end of three days, we will be agreed. We'll rig a wireless in your taxi; we'll leave Seabrook here; I'll go along with you as operator; and before we start we'll send out the big s.o.s. to bring the army trucks and air fleets down behind us."

"I don't know, . . ." said Wauthier, and for the first time Estienne became impatient.

"Listen, then, if you want to hear the other side of it. They've just been through a hell of a mess that's cost Christ knows how many thousand dollars, how many thousand gallons of gasoline, over at In Salah. Do you think they will be pleased if they've got to do it all over again for an American woman novelist? I admit flat that it would give the Trans-Saharan Transport Company a black eye, and that I'm protecting my interests, but it would give you as an officer-pilot a black eye too. Who

asked you to leave her at Gao? Who asked you to help in the Reginansi hunt? And what use was the stunt you did? Don't you know they'd tie it all up together and give you a hell of a black eye? It would raise a stink in the newspapers, and by God, since she's a civilian and a foreigner, and since you're on vacation, it would cost Seabrook, or me, or somebody a pretty penny when the bills came in. To hell with all those considerations if life and death were involved—I wouldn't give you such advice—but they've got plenty of food and water, plenty of blankets to keep them warm."

He stopped, ashamed of himself for losing his temper, calmed himself, and added:

"Besides—this is something I've often thought of from my own experiences—if you break down or get lost on a lonely country road in France, it's usually muddy and raining, and you're hungry and wet, and you sit up, hungry and thirsty, all night inside the car until some farmer comes along; but if you break down or get lost in the Sahara, you make camp, cook yourself a hot dinner, drink all you want, roll in your blankets, and go to sleep beneath the beautiful stars."

This time my Capitaine said nothing. I don't think I had ever said anything. But we were agreed. When we went to dinner, I think we all felt less worried. And Estienne was commander in chief.

# XI

LOOKING back over those three days in memory and in my notes, I can only explain them on the theory held by William James and his successors that the mind is not dulled but on the contrary sharpened, overkeyed, abnormally stimulated, by prolonged nervous strain or pain—especially if accompanied by physical inactivity.

We had lost all taste for picnics, Arab teas, excursions in the neighboring oases. We began to mope. And presently, like a couple of unbalanced neurotics, we sought a consolation, almost like a Freudian transference, in our idle airplane. It lay there at rest in the sand like a monstrous white beautiful bird, in front of the Bordj, just outside the walls. Biplanes look like box kites fitted with engines, but monoplanes resemble birds in a true sense. We could look down on it from the roof. It was more than a bird, it was a sort of angel. It had never failed us, or Marjorie. We went out to it ten times a day for any excuse or none. We talked to it. It was an angel that spit tobacco juice all over its own face when flying, but we washed its face until it was as white and

pretty as the day it was born. We wiped its nose and fussed over it. We often sat in the sand under one of its wings for hours at a time, though there were comfortable armchairs, good reading, and good human company, when Estienne wasn't busy, in the bar. Bauret had gone.

Sometimes when a breeze came up, it moaned and groaned. We decided it made these noises because it wanted to fly. We gave it a personality. Wauthier was sometimes almost happy in a melancholy way. I suppose it was the first time, with long forced idleness, that he had ever *contemplated* this airplane which he personally owned and which had been his companion over so many thousand adventurous miles. He loved it, I think, more than sweetheart, mistress, mother.

We had other moments reassuring each other about Marjorie, telling ourselves that it was nonsense to be worried, that she wasn't suffering thirst or hunger at any rate. What we were really thinking all the time was, "But suppose that, by one chance in a thousand, they forgot the reserve water, or that the tank leaked?" It was impossible not to recall the tight squeeze of Reginansi and his two companions. They were also supposed, at first, to have had an ample reserve supply of water. There are extremely unpleasant physical details connected with suffering from thirst; we had recently heard some of them; we never mentioned them, we continually assured ourselves it was nonsense to worry seriously, but they came

buzzing back into our brains like poisonous insects—Marjorie Worthington is a young woman regarded by a good many people as being beautiful—the mucous membrane of the lips becomes dry and leathery; crusts form in the mouth and throat; the tongue swells and turns black; you have fever; you moisten your mouth night and morning with your own urine; and if you have an automatic, you think about using it.

Poisonous gnats! We swatted them. Such a thing had never happened to a passenger in the whole history of the Trans-Saharan Transport. Georges Estienne himself was running this. It wasn't happening now.

What with our nervous moping and idleness, there were other things besides the airplane that took on new aspects, new colorings. There was the desert itself, and the sky. Spending a good deal of our time on the roof, sometimes in the glare, sometimes beneath the stars, staring out over the immensity for a sign, in company with the silent watchman, sometimes up there even before the dawn, we saw, felt, and were part of the tremendous procession of wheeling nights and days. Like old Ezekiel, we saw the wheel.

To understand the terrific poetic imagery and equally terrific theology of the Old Testament, I think one must abide for a time in the desert. For their great odyssey was essentially a desert odyssey; the Sinai Peninsula inspired the Hebrew poets and gave them their symbolism. All

gods, I suspect, are sun gods, and the greatest of them all, the Lord God of Hosts, is Jehovah, the friend and benefactor of man, yet Jehovah the Terrible, full of wrath and jealousy, the Dreadful. On the roof at Reggan, we beheld His manifestation. We had gone up shivering, in the black bitter night but with the stars already paling, huddled in our burnouses against the cold, looking down over the oases to watch the dawn. The sun appeared, veiled by the rose-pink haze of horizon sand-dust in the eastern sky, and we looked upon its face. It immediately dispelled the cold. Its slanting rays fell sweetly, mildly, upon us; it was the great friend, the warmth-giver, the life-giver—yet to become in a few hours the terrible enemy of man, from whom all men must cover their heads at noonday or hide among the shadows, the God of the Burning Bush, of whom the inspired prophet said, "No man can look upon his unveiled face and live." The ancient Jews were a desert people, sound theologians and admirable poets. It was only when they became softened and effeminate in a land of milk and honey that they invented a minor Greek prose-poem which is less sound theologically and comparatively devoid of literary distinction.

Speaking of old Ezekiel, I had a vision too "in that day," but which, thank God, was not prophetic. The mind, I repeat, does weird things under idleness and strain. I saw Marjorie dead. Seeing her dead, I won-



dered whether we would bury her in the desert, or whether we would bring her back. And if so, would we carry her body in the airplane?

I suppose I might have gone completely cuckoo during that period if it hadn't been broken up by a number of minor and slightly sardonic *divertissements*.

If Estienne also was worried, he concealed it admirably. I don't think he was ever actually much worried, except that he felt sorry for us, and of an afternoon when he had been in the wireless house talking to Bechar, he came out and said half-humorously: "Cheer up a little. We're going to have some company for dinner tonight—a big bus-load of movie people . . . English . . . you can talk to them in your own language."

"Who?"

"Well, they're headed by ex-Commander So-and-So of the Royal Navy, who is director or manager. I don't remember the name of the company, but they're all English—I believe—except the one woman star, who's a French *vedette* from Paris."

"How long will they be here?"

"Oh, just the night. We're sending them through on a fast schedule. They're going to make some pictures, I believe, in the Timbuctoo region. Anyway, they're English.

You can talk to them in your own language. They'll tell you all about it."

Now I have a very great admiration and even liking for the English—in England. I don't even mind them in America. But I have observed over a period of many years that, for social or psychological reasons which I don't pretend to fathom, the Englishman always shows his worst side, his most unpleasant characteristics, when he comes to France and associates with French people. An Englishman you have been really fond of in London, and whom you've enjoyed entertaining in New York, becomes by some curious chemistry a wholly different person in Montmartre or Montparnasse. It is all the more painful if he speaks French—that is, with the average arbitrary British accent. Of course the American French accent is nothing to brag of, and the German French accent is not so hot either. But there is something particularly aggravating about the average Englishman's accent. I think they do it on purpose. I shouldn't be surprised if they felt it was degrading to speak French the way the French do. Look at what they do to Latin. If they come from Cambridge, they say "summer's peas," and I defy any living modern descendant of the Romans, even the Pope himself, to guess that they mean *summa spes*—unless he is already familiar with the high-handed, arbitrary linguistic insolence of the Briton.

So that I listened to Estienne, first with misgivings,

and then with a sudden nervous conviction that I wasn't feeling up to it. I said:

"Do me a favor, both of you, will you? I'm not feeling good. I don't want to talk to them in their own language, or in any language. I'm tired. I'm Wauthier's mechanic, see? I'm a French army mechanic, and a pretty dumb one at that. See?"

"Sure," they said, ". . . if that's the way you feel about it. . . . Let's have a whisky and soda."

By a twist that was paradoxical, and under the circumstances slightly contemptible, I found that I was not averse to witnessing the arrival of the English movie outfit. If I had been a consistent and decent person, I could have simply gone to my own bedroom, gotten a book, and stayed there. Instead I was out in the courtyard with Estienne and Wauthier, but careful to keep a few paces behind them. The roar of the motor had been audible since before sundown and they arrived in the clear twilight.

It was a big, gray-white shining autobus de luxe of the Trans-Saharan, not unlike those of the P.L.M. that ply between Paris and Monte Carlo. It had a driver and a mechanic. As soon as its passengers descended—there were a dozen or more males and the one female star, who, like most young movie actresses, was pretty—they owned the place. They wanted to know where the bar was, and the water-closets, and what time dinner would be ready,

and whether there was any ice. Bauret being absent, Estienne seemed to be the hotel clerk. At any rate they began by treating him as such, but that was only for a moment. He did nothing about it, but there was something intrinsically iron in him that commanded respect. Some of them spoke fluent, domineering French which hurt the ears, but what they overlooked (a customary oversight) was that Estienne also spoke perfect English. They said what they pleased in their own language, and I'm sure they wouldn't have wished deliberately that he could understand all of it. They paid little or no attention to Wauthier, who was bareheaded and not in uniform. Abdullah and other Arab servants came out to give a hand. The group scattered, some to the bar, some to the water-closets, some to look at their rooms. We went to the library-lounge in the hall giving on the bar.

Presently they began to come in. Their director, the ex-naval Commander, who was not stupid by any means, spied Wauthier's cap with its gold stripes and wings on a peg. He whispered to Estienne and was introduced to Wauthier. I had been sitting with Wauthier. The Commander looked casually, questioningly.

"*Le mécanicien,*," said Estienne, "*le caporal Durand.*" I rose, saluted, and moved to the background.

The ex-Commander sat down with Wauthier, engaging him in conversation in French while the other dozen gentlemen made themselves at home "in their own lan-

guage." They expressed their opinions about us, the French, the hotel, the Sahara, with the freedom of the lords of the earth—but since the position I had chosen to put myself in was dishonest and equivocal, contemptible if you like, it would be carrying contemptibleness too far now to repeat their eavesdropped conversations.

The young French female star came in, joining her director and Wauthier, who kissed her hand and beamed. She beamed back at him and I believe they sat side by side at dinner. I ate in the outhouse with the chauffeur and the mechanic.

Next morning, when we got up, they were gone. They weren't as bad as all that. I am slightly ashamed of what I have written about them. But I was nervous, in a disagreeable humor, and that was the way it happened. Estienne and Capitaine had been more suave, amiably amused. I missed Bauret, who was off in the desert hunting for Marjorie. I'm sure if he'd been there, he'd have been even more nasty in his way than I.

The wireless had been working again. At breakfast Estienne said: "Well, the beans are spilled, unofficially. Everybody from Lake Tchad to Algiers knows, unofficially, that we've lost Madame Worthington, and they're wondering when and where we'll find her. There's even an unofficial *alerte* at Bechar notifying the squadron that it may be called out on quick notice. Same thing at In Salah. Just been talking with some of the operators.

Several stations evidently listened in on our earlier messages to Tabancort, and it's started the usual gossip. Doesn't make much difference, since she's certainly all right, and we're going to find her ourselves without yelling calf, but it's getting to be a damned pity that you can't turn around in the desert without getting yourself talked about all the way from Casa to the Niger."

Estèbe had said, "The Sahara has a thousand faces." Here again was one of them, Sahara-Greenwich-Village-1932. The Sahara is almost as big as the whole United States, while the white people who inhabit it are only a scattered few, small groups stationed hundreds, thousands of miles apart, seeing each other by accident maybe once a year or once in a lifetime or never—but wherever two or three are gathered together there's sure to be a radio, and not a music box either, but a sending and receiving station for official purposes, for serious business. Also for gossip. Consequently, if Madame Biscarat at Gao has a pain in her tummy or changes the color of her lip stick or smiles too fondly on a young new pilot, it is known and discussed within twenty-four hours in Timbuctoo, Bechar, Beni Abbès, Reggan, and isolated posts in the Hogar. If Bauret, for instance, has a quarrel with Estienne at Reggan, you will find after you have flown for ten hours to some other isolated spot in the desert that they are already discussing the pros and cons and want you to give them the latest dope. If an aviator

breaks his arm or smashes his plane on the landing-field, you may not hear of it right away because that's just part of the day's work, but if that same aviator slaps the face of his Arab mistress, or takes another mistress, or gets into a flirtation with the postmistress, everybody knows it immediately all the way to Algiers and back.

Natural, human, and harmless, all this—harmless and natural also the present unofficial gossip about a temporarily lost American woman novelist. But what is not so pleasant about wireless leakage in the desert, a thing that for all my sincere admiration of French colonization I would dare mildly to criticize, is that there is no protection or secrecy in the sending of official and business messages. Operators too frequently listen in on messages that are not intended for them and afterward disseminate information which should be kept private. In the Sahara today, for instance, there is a sharp and legitimate business competition between the Standard Oil people and the Shell people. There is also competition in the transport business between the Trans-Saharan and the Trans-African. And leakage in messages touching these matters is occasionally less pleasant, less innocent.

We had given up sitting on the roof with the watchman. We were moping again, out under the wing of the airplane, sulking in the sand. It was toward sundown and

we thought we might go into the bar soon for a drop of something, maybe a bottle of beer. Estienne strolled out, unhurried, looked at us quizzically, sat down in the sand with us, and lighted a cigarette.

"Well, everything's o.k.," he said. ". . . Won't have to keep dinner waiting tonight. They'll be here about seven-thirty, in time for an *apéritif*."

"Eh! What!"

"You won't be able to see it for a little while yet . . . it takes trained eyes . . . but my Arab on the roof has been watching it for a quarter of an hour. The car itself, of course, is way down over the rim of the earth's curve, but there's a faint, steadily moving little cloud of sand dust, pale yellow, unmistakable. Only motor trucks make it exactly that way and this can only be theirs. I suspect it will be Bauret with her. When it gets dark and they turn on their headlights, you'll begin to see a faint reflected glare above, before they actually come over the rim."

He pointed, we climbed up on the plane, but with the whole bare flat desert southward vibrating, glowing in the late sunset, we couldn't distinguish the spot he said was there. He was so calm, so sure, however, that we believed him absolutely.

No need to go up on the roof now, he said; we could watch just as well from where we were, or in front of the gate. He left us. Twilight fell rapidly, and in the



gathering darkness we were fooled two or three times by stars or planets on the horizon, but we really didn't see anything. Soon after seven it was black dark and we believed we saw the reflected glow, but couldn't be sure. Estienne came out again. In a moment he said, "There, look!" and we sighted in turn along his arm. "But that's a planet, or a star," we said. "No, it's the direct glare of their headlights. They're still ten or fifteen miles away, but they're on a rise. It'll dip and disappear again presently." After a while, it did disappear. It was not a planet. It was a human light moving.

And then, by God, there was a deep, far-off hum in the night, like bumblebees in distant elms, and pretty soon it was the distant muffled roar of an engine opened wide—and for the first time really, though we had believed him from the beginning, joy surged up in us.

At almost the same moment, surging too like a quick, white little sunrise, then glaring blindingly in our faces, the headlights came up over a dune not more than a mile away, and the truck came thundering down on us.

Half-blinded by the glare, we yet recognized the two cloaked figures hunched comfortably together by the wheel—Marjorie and Bauret. We were a good deal more emotional about it than they were. Everybody kissed and embraced. Then I stared at Marjorie. I couldn't forget how they had found Reginansi. She was unsmiling, but her eyes were glowing, her cheeks round and health-

colored, wind-colored, her lips smooth, full, and moist. She didn't smile. She didn't say anything. I almost said idiotically, "Has the cat got your tongue?" She had a big Toulon colored handkerchief wound round her head, and a rumpled leather coat over a shirt, Arab trousers, and on her stockingless feet a pair of heelless green native slippers I had never seen before. I didn't say anything to her. She was quiet, calm, formidable, almost fearsome, like a woman out of a Greek drama.

Bauret was grinning like a devil, but not thinking of Marjorie. He was talking to Estienne. "The god-damned fool!" he said. "He finally made Bidon 5—and then lost the trail again!"

"Well," said Estienne, "he's the best mechanic in the whole of Africa."

Marjorie said:

"If you don't mind, I'd like a big whisky-soda and a cigarette."



## PART THREE



## XII

THERE are three mines of "source material," or "*documentation*," as the serious French chroniclers say, from which to reconstruct the story of Marjorie Worthington's adventure:

First, the tale, confined to high lights, some humorous, which she and Bauret poured into our ears on the same night of their return to Reggan. They said little or nothing at dinner in answer to our questions, but in the lounge afterward—relaxed—they talked until nearly midnight.

Second, the mass of backward-remembered details after time had passed (and in wholly different surroundings) which she has told at odd times in various casual conversations, some in Paris, some in Toulon, some on the Riviera.

Third, her own notebook, a sort of unpublished personal diary from which I shall quote only indirectly. If she wrote travel or adventure, she might make a "best seller" of it, for though the whole thing lasted only a few days, and ended without casualties, it was an experience which I doubt if any other woman—certainly no other American woman—has ever had.

In brief, they were lost, totally lost, circling blindly for three days and nights in that worst of all deserts, the Tanesruft, the traditional forbidden Desert of Thirst, the heart of the Great Sahara.

And then, after they had finally picked up the trail and finally found Bidon 5, to put it as bluntly as Bauret did on that first night, "the god-damned fool missed the trail again."

They had plenty of water and food. They suffered no physical anguish. But the most curious psychological feature of the adventure is that it left its permanent mark on Marjorie, which neither the beauty parlors of Paris nor the waves of Juan-les-Pins can wash out. The desert left its mark on her. She smiles less than she used to. She is calmer than she used to be. But it isn't that. In some queer way the desert *got* her. She wants to go back into it, not over it in an airplane, or in a tourist autobus deluxe, but into the heart of it. She will surely some day go. But that will be a different story, in which I, quite probably, may play no part. The desert grabbed me by the sleeve for a moment in that little sand storm, but it let go again too quickly to leave any mark or scar. I am indifferent to whether I go back or not.

Analyzing a little the circumstances under which Marjorie got lost, before telling the details of it—in justice to

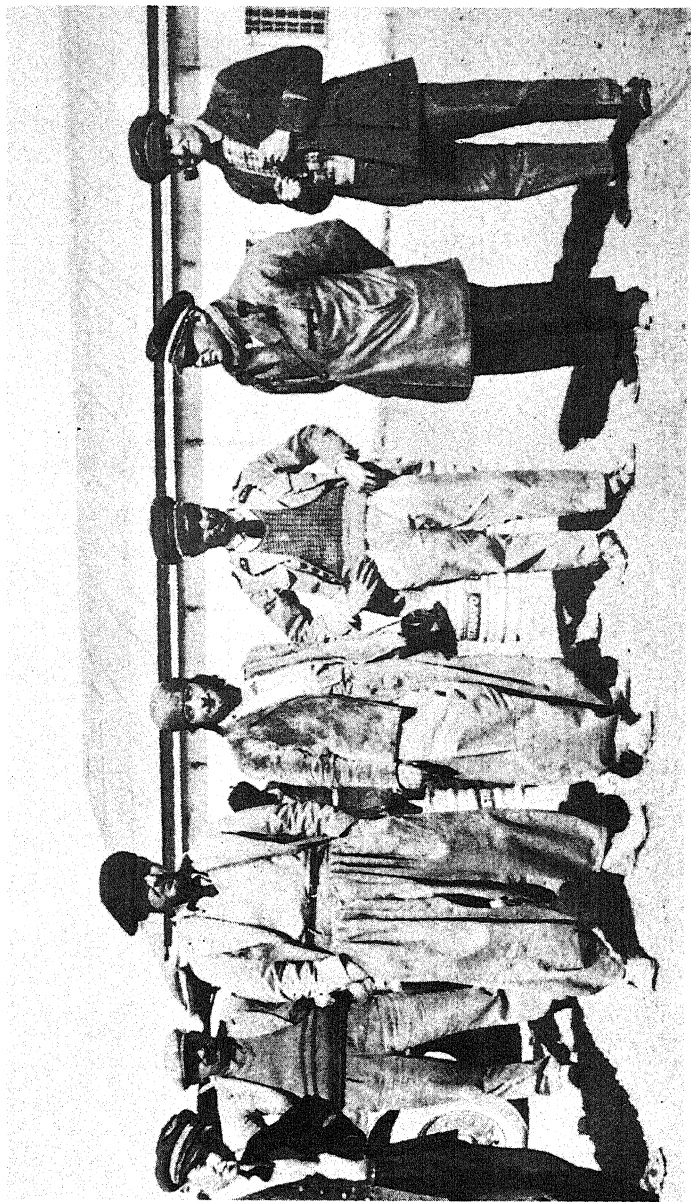
the Trans-Saharan Transport, which annually handles hundreds of travelers and tourists and delivers them at their destinations in safety, in comfort, and on schedules which may be compared favorably with any well-organized ocean line—I think what happened on this occasion is what frequently happens when you are a “friend of the family” or “in the same business,” or are actually a member of the family, cousin, brother-in-law, or something like that. If we had been strangers, or not-friends, Marjorie could have waited in Gao, for all they cared, for days or weeks or a fortnight, for a seat in one of their big tourist busses which come through with a kitchenette, steward, wireless operator, compass, like ships on schedule. But we were in a hurry. They admired and liked Wauthier. It happened that none of their regular desert chauffeurs was at Gao just then—so they lent us their *mécanicien-chef*, “the best mechanic in the whole of Africa.” As a desert chauffeur, he turned out to be—a swell mechanic. It wasn’t his fault. He was requisitioned. It wasn’t anybody’s fault. They were doing us a favor. We weren’t tourists. We were friends of the family. And we were in a hurry. So they started blithely up from Gao in a good old Renault truck, well provisioned, well oiled, lickety-split, with a bottle of Benedictine as a parting gift from Madame Biscarat—to cross in a hurry the sandy Sahara.

However, it seems Marjorie was treated by chance to a



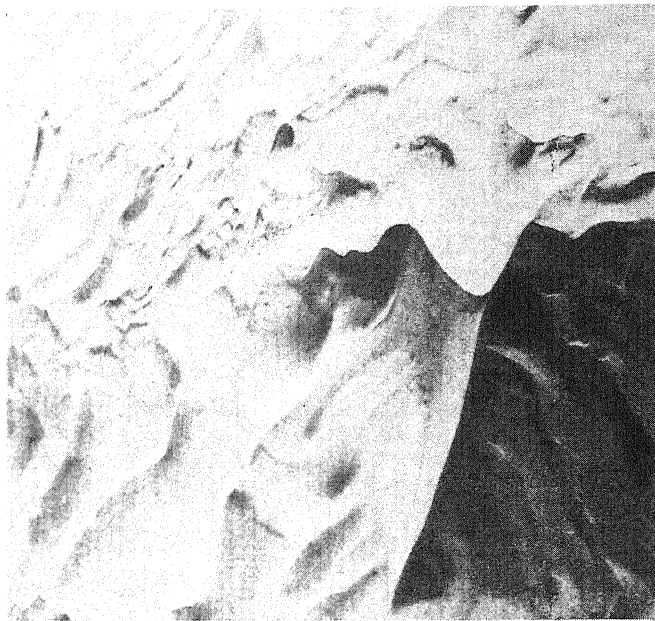
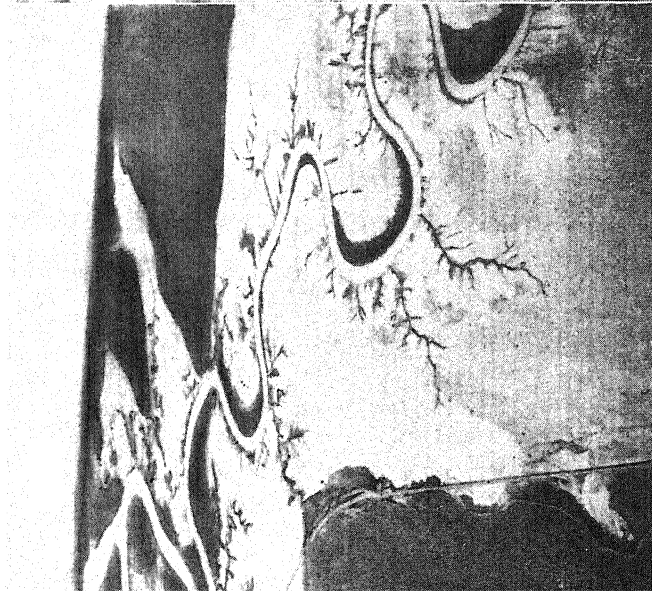
spectacular side-show on the afternoon before they quit Gao. She was seated on the terrace of the hotel de luxe with its American bar, electric ice box, modern-art curtains, and Madame Biscarat, when fifty superb Tuaregs, mounted on racing camels, with flowing robes and veiled faces, rifles, swords, and lances, massed into the compound and dismounted. In their midst, on the finest camel of all, dressed in a white linen shirt and BVD's, was a thin, young, pale, beautiful creature whom they treated like royalty. Marjorie, being slightly nearsighted, said that she couldn't quite make out at first whether it was the Prince of Wales or Trader Horn's mythical white goddess. It was in fact a person only slightly less interesting, the legendary Lieutenant Auban of the Soudanese Camel Corps. Five years ago, he was the pet, spoiled darling and Beau Brummel of Parisian society. One morning he woke up and suddenly decided that he had enough of it. A month later, he was living in a Tuareg encampment in the southern Sahara. Armed with his own officer's commission in the Meharists (the Camel Corps) he proceeded to enlist the whole encampment, making the chiefs *sous-officiers*, to their vast pride—and incidentally to the equally vast satisfaction of the government down at Bamako.

Just now they had been out on special duty, very special. They had been escorting two paunch-bellied gentlemen of the Home Office, ministerial visitors from Paris,



*Wide World Photo*

LEFT TO RIGHT: SEABROOK, MARJORIE WORTHINGTON, AND FRENCH MILITARY PILOTS AT



*Wide World Photos*

AIR VIEWS OF DESERT AND RIVER FORMATIONS SUGGESTING "MODERN ART"  
LEFT: CHINESE DRAGON. RIGHT: HEAD OF WOMAN IN HELMET AND BLACK CLOAK

on a lion hunt. They had several heads and skins. The two gentlemen from Paris, slightly fatigued, Marjorie tells me, retired for a nap. Lieutenant Auban joined Madame Biscarat and Marjorie on the veranda, while the Tuaregs pitched their tents in the yard. After it was finished, their chiefs also came up on the veranda and grouped themselves, reclining at Auban's feet. They also treated Auban, Marjorie says, like a pet, like a spoiled darling—but also like a god. They looked at him over their veils, she says, with an adoring fidelity that made her think of a finely bred hound pack at rest in the presence of their master.

These Tuaregs had never visited a hotel de luxe before. When Lieutenant Auban presently strolled into the big hall where the bar is, they followed him. They were wide-eyed, but without embarrassment or humility. They had never seen electric lights before, which he turned on to show them, and they had never seen ice, which he put in their hands and showed them how to suck. They were amused rather than impressed. They laughed and played with the electric buttons like children, making light and darkness; pretended that the ice burned them.

At dinner, she says, they insisted on serving Lieutenant Auban themselves, and when bedtime came one of the Tuaregs lay down in the corridor across the doorsill of his room, while others posted themselves like sentries at

the hotel entrances, as if it harbored a king or a generalissimo or the President of the Republic.

I heard none of this at Reggan, or in Africa. It came out one day, months later, at a luncheon with Madame Léon Cyprien Fabre and her children at their seaside villa near Marseilles. Marjorie said, "By the way, I met a cousin of yours at Gao."

"*Tiens*"—"Do tell," they said. And she did.

It was the day after this *divertissement* that they started north. They had a Renault truck, with a cloth top like an ordinary touring car, and two long seats in front, one close behind the other as they are often built for use in the colonies, with the back of the truck piled up with baggage and junk we had left behind, tools and extra tires, tins of gasoline and oil, provisions, bottles, the big metal tank with the water reserve, etc. Also a copy of *Madame Bovary*.

They got a rather late start. The sun was hot when they left Gao. The chief mechanic, since this was for him a special excursion, wore white canvas trousers, white shirt, and a helmet that was also white. Marjorie wore the baggy khaki Arab trousers which had been made for her by Mamadou Machine in Timbuctoo, a khaki shirt, and a helmet. On Madame Biscarat's advice she wound a big

silk handkerchief around her chin, mouth, and nose in the Tuareg manner, as a protection against the sand.

The first hours were through clay flats of the Niger, dotted with scrub, thorn bushes, occasional wells, drying creek-beds, grazing camels and other domestic flocks, with tent or reed-hut encampments of their nomad guardians; then clay flats beginning to be sandy and more barren, with no signs of human life, but still dotted with scrub and occasional fleeing herds of gazelles, antelopes; they might have seen a lion, but they never did; then toward evening the flat beginning of the real desert, with its southernmost outpost the mud fort of Tabancort as their objective.

Night fell and they turned on their headlights, following the wheel marks of the trail. In the black night, they saw a tiny bright light gleaming ahead. "A lantern at Tabancort," they said. Getting closer, it became two lights, glowing fiercely, greenish. The flash of their own headlights illumined a little doglike, tailed animal crouched close beside the trail, staring as they passed—a lonely jackal watching the train go by. A little while later, a real light waved far ahead, the French sergeant in charge of the post welcoming them with a farm lantern. Also a campfire beside the mud walls, with natives around it cooking something. The sergeant was happy to see them, and hospitable. He was a little man and had a long brown beard ". . . nice," said Marjorie, "and as

old-fashioned military French as a 1914 Steinlen drawing." He offered them Pernod, and asked Marjorie, if she later wrote anything about her trip, to please mention his name in it, which was *Finidori, Sergent au Bataillon Tirailleurs Sénégalais No. 2, deuxième compagnie, par Gao*. He invited them to share his dinner, and knowing how hard it was to get supplies there, they added some canned goods of their own and a bottle of wine.

There is no real garrison at Tabancort, just Sergeant Finidori, the wireless operator, and four native servants—no comforts. They fixed up a reed hut for Marjorie with a camp cot. At half-past three, a good hour before dawn, they came to wake her—it was bitter cold—and at crack of dawn they were on the trail again.

It was during this second morning, she tells me, in the still cool emptiness and total desolation of the lower Tanesruft, with the trail clearly marked and easy to follow in the hard sand, that she began to look at and get acquainted with the *mécanicien-chef*, her driver.

He was dark, had a small mustache, was about thirty-five, serious, and rather timid toward his lady passenger. She lighted a cigarette for him. He told her he had a wife in Paris whom he hadn't seen for three years, and that he was very much pleased that Estienne had put him on this special job. "Monsieur Estienne, I think, wants to see me personally. I stand very well with him, and he is probably going to arrange something better for me, which

will maybe give me a chance meantime to go back to France for a vacation."

"I suppose you have driven over this trail dozens of times?" said Marjorie, to make conversation. He seemed embarrassed.

"Well, no," he replied, "in fact I've never exactly driven over it. In fact I've only been over it once, coming to Gao, and somebody else drove, but it's easy enough . . . you see yourself how easy it is to follow."

It was so easy to follow, and so totally devoid of landscape, just an endless infinity of good, hard, flat, pebbly sand, that Marjorie read *Madame Bovary* for a while, until it got too glaring and hot to read.

But with the glare came also the customary brilliant, shifting pageant of mirages. She says that there in the lower Tanesruft, while brilliant and beautiful, they lack variety, become after a little while monotonous, reproducing over and over again the same shifting landscapes with only minor details changed, like a painter who has run out of inspiration and keeps repeating himself—always shimmering, shallow blue lagoons or lakes, bordered with palm trees. This would be natural in that territory, which is completely devoid for hundreds of miles in all directions of creeks, wells, oases, green wooded slopes, or mountains. The mirage has no more imagination, no more invention or originality, than the lens of a camera. It never creates an imaginary landscape. It simply projects



by refraction the faithful simulacrum of a scene which actually exists somewhere far away, identical down to the last ripple and palm frond. Here the machinery had nothing to work with except the flat lagoons and lakes of the Niger. In the northern Arabian desert, with the Lebanon on one side, Irak on the other, and the whole rich valley of the Euphrates northward, the mirages are of an almost incredible variety. It is the same, I am told, in the northern Sahara, where refracted images begin to come down from Algeria and from the Atlas—but here in the Tanesruft, where all is desolation and sameness, said Marjorie, the mirages themselves were repetitious.

A while before noon, however, the mirages disappeared, and the real landscape also changed. The sand came to an end abruptly, and they started across a level expanse of black stone, slatelike, flat, smooth, sometimes like irregular tessellated paving, sometimes broken up into shale, like slate, but dead black. Soon there was no sand, yellowness, or color anywhere. They were traversing an inland sea of black stone.

It impressed Marjorie unpleasantly. Black, she says, is a lovely color in long kid gloves, or silk, or eyes, or hair, or in trees at night—but a black *landscape* in the bright glare of day, she insists, is ugly and sinister. I have never seen a black landscape, but it is easy to believe her.

She was slightly bothered too because previous wheels had left no traces in the shale, so that for a while they

had no trail to follow. The driver was not bothered. They had told him how to pick up the trail again—an easy trick. He drove in as straight a line northward as he could across the little black trackless sea, and in an hour or more came to its northern shore, which was normal sand again. No immediate sign of the trail, but they dropped an empty bottle for a marker, and then turned due west, along the “beach.” They would go for about a quarter of an hour, and if they didn’t pick up the trail in that direction, they would return to the marker, and look for it eastward. Their first guess was right. They picked up the clearly marked trail within five minutes, and headed north again.

Sure of being right (which they were), and having driven steadily since dawn for about eight hours, they stopped for lunch and a little rest. The glare and heat were now intense, so they didn’t get out of the car. They opened a can of tongue, made sandwiches, drank some water mixed with wine, lighted cigarettes, said they’d cook themselves a good hot dinner at Bidon 5 that night, had a brief nap stretched out on the seats, and were on their way again. It was so hot, Marjorie says, that their shirts clung wet to their flesh, while their faces baked. They tied handkerchiefs over their chins and mouths like Tuaregs. Again they were in flat, pebbly sand, the heart now of the Tanesruft. Ahead of them, all of a sudden, immediately beside the trail, they came upon a rudely

painted signboard, nailed to a pole, slightly askew, driven into the sand. It was in French, headed,

*Pension de Famille*

She jotted it down in her notebook. Translated it runs like this:

*Family Boarding-house*

MODERN COMFORTS

SUN BATHS

Bauret told us afterward that it had been stuck up by a friend of his who broke down there and had to make camp for several days, waiting for spare parts. It has stuck there, surviving seasons and sand storms, for several years.

A few miles further on they came on a second, smaller sign nailed to another post. It was a blue-and-white enameled plaque such as you see beneath the bell of thousands of houses in Paris. It read,

*Sonnette de Concierge*

They laughed a little. The Sahara had become, so they thought, a sort of back yard to France and Algeria, with its little jokes, its intimate comedies.

It was awhile after that, toward five o'clock in the afternoon, after two or three hours of hard, fast running,

that they began for the first time, both of them, to be disturbed. They were still on the trail—on *a* trail, that is, previous wheel marks—but somehow it didn't seem to be exactly right, and it seemed to be getting gradually fainter. "Wiped out by a sand storm along here, maybe," said the driver. "It'll show up clear again in a little." But they also began to notice that the sun, which was getting well down in the afternoon sky, seemed to have begun to shift around laterally, to be in the wrong place, since they were headed north.

Marjorie and the driver had gradually become natural to each other, had become friendly companions, so that he did not attempt to conceal his growing puzzlement and bother. Suddenly he said to her:

"Tell me, madame, does the sun here set in the west?"

Now this sounds, heard in a hurry, like an imbecile question, and Marjorie said it startled her. But it was not imbecile. The sun, of course, sets always westerly, but not always by any means in the west. In New York and Paris, for instance, in midwinter it sets a good many degrees south of west. So that instead of thinking, "You're a fool," or saying, "Are you kidding me?" she reflected, which women don't always do before answering questions. She reflected that although it was February, still winter, they were well below the Tropic of Cancer, and said:

"Yes, down here, I think it sets about in the west."

He said:

"Well, then, it looks like we're off our direction, but we're certainly following wheel marks."

When Marjorie was telling of this in Toulon, aboard the yawl of some adventurous friends—amateur navigators—who have done some pretty sailing, even outside the Mediterranean, but who had never navigated in the desert, they said:

"But look . . . you lose the trail seriously and can't find it again in a stretch of desert like that . . . you haven't got instruments or a compass, *bien entendu* . . . but why don't you simply forget the trail and beat it due north by the sun and the stars? With plenty of food, water, and gasoline, you'll surely arrive somewhere in southern Algeria and be all right."

The answer is that with the regular ordinary touring motor cars or trucks (the quickest, cheapest, and best vehicles for desert cruising) you cannot pass unless you stay more or less on the traced and tried ways. You come, far further north, if you go north at random, to bad lands, gullies, little cliffs and gorges even, where no car can pass, where you would get caught like rats in a trap and probably die unfound; or you get mired past your hubs, up to your engine, in soft sand and dunes; the car can never be salvaged; you lose the car, and get thoroughly sworn at by the people who come to rescue you.

You can, of course, smash through in caterpillar

tractors, which are the tanks of peace; likewise if you're in an airplane and must, and are heavily fueled and watered, you can do as a friend of Laperasse did, "forget the maps, forget the compass, and fly north—or south—with all your gas, toward the Pole Star or the Southern Cross." And you will arrive eventually, *d.v.*, either at the Mediterranean or at the Niger. But with the ordinary motor trucks, which have been now generally adopted, you stick to the trails, to the "ocean lanes," as much as you can, unless you are an old Mohican like Bauret, or unless you get thoroughly lost or go crazy.

Marjorie and her driver were at this point only a little bit lost, but they became more so. The wheel ruts petered out, disappeared entirely. They veered a few degrees, picking up north by the setting sun, with a couple of hours of daylight yet to go, barging occasionally for a quarter of a mile slightly to left or right, looking for the trail, which they did not find. They were in trackless, pebbly sand which met the horizon and the sky in a circle completely void except for the red setting sun.

They were worried, Marjorie writes in her notes, but not terribly worried. They both knew, before sunset, that they wouldn't cook a hot dinner that night at Bidon 5—wouldn't reach Bidon 5. But it was getting cooler—the desert just after sunset is very beautiful—and (I find this implied rather than said outright in the tone of her notes) a fifty-quart metal reserve tank of water which

hasn't even been tapped, a quantity of canned goods ranging from beef stew to paté de fois gras, several bottles of wine, and a whole gunny sack of dates, gave them a justified confidence, if a less justified optimism.

They wouldn't pick up the trail before dark, unless they had luck. They'd more likely camp somewhere in trackless, sand-strewn interstellar space. But it was beautiful, and in the morning, in the dawn, refreshed and having slept well, they'd check up with the sunrise, and find the trail easily.

They agreed, toward dark, and stopped. It had grown quickly chilly, so they had a hot dinner after all. They had no stove or burner, but they had fun, like a couple of kids pretending to be lost. The driver poured a puddle of gasoline in the sand. They put a big can of *cassoulet*, which is a special bean-and-meat stew from the Touraine, in the puddle and set it afire. They burned their fingers opening it, opened also a bottle of red Algerian wine, got a dry, dirty loaf of bread and a thin tin of lobster from the back of the truck, and had a better dinner than some people have in speakeasies. They poured another spot of gasoline in the sand and reheated what was left of the coffee from the thermos. With it they had a drop of Benedictine from the bottle given them by Madame Biscarat, and cigarettes.

The driver advised Marjorie, for warmth, to sleep in the back of the truck, with the spare tires and junk. But

it was so beautiful under the stars that she insisted on sleeping "in the desert." So they took out one of the long seat cushions and made her a cot. She had a leather coat and a burnoose, but she damned near froze, she says, before morning. Only pride prevented her from crawling into the truck—and fear of disturbing the chauffeur.

At four o'clock, or whatever hour it was in the pale, deathly gray "false dawn" which Fitzgerald wrote about in the *Rubáiyát* and which precedes the sunrise, they shook themselves, heated their last drops of left-over coffee, and were rolling again, to pick up the trail.

They picked up after a while, instead, in that weird gray light, the bleached skeletons of several camels. They were going slowly, watching the trackless sand for tracks. Something glinted, and it was an old sardine tin, half rusted away but clean and shining, scoured, but by accident left unburied, by the wind and sand. A little further on they came upon another skeleton of a camel, and this time there was still another skeleton which was unpleasantly not that of a camel. They knew now that they were definitely off all motor trails. And they didn't like it.

All that long day, through morning coolness, midday heat, long afternoon, until another sunset, they circled lost. They circled intelligently, slowly northward, making zigzags which grew gradually wider, allowing for the increased margin of possible error. But when it got too



dark to look for signs, they were still lost, and again made camp for the night.

Concerning that third night, there is nothing written in Marjorie's notes, nor did she tell me anything about it, except that they hadn't found the trail and had spent another night in the open. This chronicle of mine was almost terminated, and both she and I had regarded our whole brief Saharan adventure as a subject definitely finished—above all not to be used as a topic of conversation to bore our friends—when one evening very recently she went back to it.

It was late after dinner, on a terrace overlooking the Bay of Bandol, and some mixed French friends were discussing, in intimacy, what they called *la lâcheté humaine*, and finding extremely personal incidents to illustrate it. The word *lâcheté* is translated by Cassell's dictionary to mean "cowardice, baseness, mean thought or action." It is pretty well defined. In intimate conversation, it means something contemptible which is done, or thought, by a habitually decent person at a moment when pressure or circumstances push you to a point where you forget decency, common sense, and whatever "code" your family and heredity may or may not have inculcated in you. Our friends were intelligently—and appallingly—honest. There was one who had given up a brilliant Catholic political church future, who confessed that he had hung on to his high ecclesiastical job for three years, after

defying the Church authorities and their hating him, and trying to throw him out, because while he wasn't afraid of the Pope, or even of God Almighty, he was afraid of becoming poor, or shabby, of not having newly laundered linen, of not being able to take the most expensive room and bath without asking the price, when he stopped in a provincial city. And there was a lady, higher up in her own way than Marjorie or any writer will ever go, a lady no longer young, whose daughters marry and divorce in the rotogravure and Hearst Sunday supplements, who said:

"In the year such-and-such, after the war, with a gilded Louis XV apartment, but with the furniture not ours, and nothing to eat and no money for myself or my daughters or my maid . . ." and she proceeded to tell a tale that would make the hair of the present husbands of the roto-gravured daughters stand on end.

Each of us told something. (I told about having stolen a mildewed dollar bill and some rusty silver change from Dr. Arthur Livingston in the summer of 1918 on Swan's Island. If he happens to read this, I'll pay him back—in lire.) It makes a good game if you know the people well enough—I don't mean stealing, I mean confessing. I suppose Holy Mother Church first popularized it. Then the psychoanalysts. It's not bad, even when played by amateurs. When it was Marjorie's turn, she said:

"It was the second night, last February, that time we

were lost down there in the desert. Something happened, that is, happened to me inside myself, which made me so ashamed that I have never told it. We were sure we had plenty of water, even for being lost, but we didn't brush our teeth or wash our hands or faces; we drank all we wished but we didn't waste a drop for any other purpose—and my poor driver had begun to look like Louis Wolheim or Noah Beery. The last day had been especially tough on him. Two or three times we had entered areas of soft sand. He had been forced each time to let almost all the air out of the tires so that they would flatten to prevent us from sinking right up to the wheel bases. And each time when we came out on hard sand again, he had to pump them up. The heat had been almost unbearable. We drove, drove, drove, trying to make wider zigzags, each one a little further northward, and we found nothing, nothing, nothing, just endless blank, no mark, no trail, no sign of life either animal or human, not even skeletons—except that once we came on wheel tracks, followed them, and came back to the skull of an antelope with a broken horn which we had seen before. We had been following our own tracks. Our morale was low.

“That night when we camped—it had already begun to be cool—we each had a big drink of brandy before trying to heat any food. I noticed that the driver's hands shook. His eyes were bloodshot, and by this time his face was covered with a three-day stubble of black beard. I

could hardly believe he was the same neat, confident young man with whom I had set out from Gao. I thought he looked back at me queerly—kept looking at me. As we ate without appetite in the light of the lantern it began to get colder and colder. It was about then that a thought strayed through my head to which I attributed no special significance at the moment. I thought, ‘Nobody on earth knows where we are; there’s probably not another human being within hundreds of miles of us.’

“It was a little bit afterward that the driver, who had been looking at me again, sideways, out of his bloodshot eyes, said, ‘I think you’d better sleep inside the truck tonight.’

“I looked at him—and said, ‘Not at all. I’ll sleep out here on one of the seats.’ He tried to argue, telling me it was going to be bitter cold. After a while—the lantern was extinguished and it was black except for the stars—he was inside in the truck and I was out on my cushion in the sand, and there was complete silence . . . and I lay torpidly, thinking, instead of going to sleep. A sort of revelation came to me. I understood everything now from the first. Three years in the bush, with a young wife back in Paris. He knew well enough where the trail was. He had known all the time. He knew now where the trail was. It was disgusting and a bore, when everything had been so nice. It would be a quarrel, maybe even a nasty physical struggle, if he was that strong and stupid.

Messy. I was all the more resentful because he had been right about the cold. It was icy, bitter. It must have been a little after midnight when I heard him stirring. He was climbing down out of the truck, stealthily, trying not to make a sound, and tiptoed across the sand to where I lay. He bent down, spread another doubled blanket over me—his own blanket—and when I didn't stir tucked it in a little on the sides. Then he tiptoed back and climbed into the truck again.

"I think I am more ashamed of it than of anything that has ever happened to me. I was ashamed for myself, and ashamed, too, in a queer way I can't exactly explain, for woman-ness. I mean for being a woman at all. I hate St. Paul, but I suppose in a way we are viler than men. I don't know. I feel a little better for having told it."

The women, sipping their drinks, liking Marjorie, agreed with this last . . . that it was perhaps a characteristic female *lâcheté*.

"You'd better not tell it to Doctor Freud," said the former churchman. ". . . Remember that tale about the women of Moscow when Napoleon's troops came in?"

## XIII

IT WAS toward two o'clock of an afternoon in the worst glare and heat of the day after Marjorie's (perhaps Freudian) waking nightmare that, circling always northward, and not so dumbly either, they picked up—crossing it at an angle and not realizing it until they were actually on top of it and slowed up with jammed-on brakes—the main Trans-Saharan trail, a maze of overlapped parallel wheel-marks, unmistakable, not even blurred by sand storms, and running, as they rightly guessed, though the sun was too high and too glaring to serve as a compass point, almost true north toward Bidon 5.

Marjorie says that neither she nor the driver felt any profound emotional sense of relief of the sort which when put into words says, "Saved at last!" or, "Thank God!" They had been worried, bothered, low, but they had never been in a funk about being lost. They had been having all they wanted to eat and drink—with plenty more to eat and drink for many days—they knew that they were expected at Reggan and that if they didn't eventually pick up the trail themselves they could de-

pend on Estienne. They were pleased, she said, and hungry again, and having found the trail they stopped to eat canned sardines and big, greasy, paper-thin slabs of canned Mortadella sausage with hunks of bread so hard and dry they broke if you tried to cut them—washed down with lots of water thinly mixed with wine, since it was hot afternoon and they were planning to cover a lot of route in the afternoon heat.

They rode on now, at sixty miles an hour, over a boulevard trail that by a continued wind-chance was never blurred. As the sun sank, they verified their guess that it ran true north, and presently when the stars came out there was the Dipper off at the left, pointing to the Pole Star, directly in front of them like a lighthouse.

She poked her head out and craned back, she says, looking for the Southern Cross. It was low on the horizon, tilted sideways like the True Cross in paintings of "The Elevation" by Rubens or Rembrandt. They were racing up toward Bidon 5, which is almost at the Tropic of Cancer. Good-by soon to the Southern Cross. It wasn't long before they saw a little red light far ahead—the guardian's cook fire. And soon they saw a moving light. Mohammed ben Taleb had heard their motor and was waving his farm lantern.

Mohammed, Marjorie says, broke into a broad grin when he recognized her, and flapped his arms like a bird to show he remembered she had been there before in an

airplane. Then, finding that the driver spoke Arabic, he said he'd been cured of his constipation and thanked her for the pills.

Then they saw in the shadows another Trans-Saharan truck. They wondered if it was somebody already sent to look for them. It was a southbound freight truck that had broken down several days before. The chauffeur came out of one of the shelters, with a blanket wrapped round his head, and talked in a hoarse, sleepy, croaking voice to Marjorie's driver, the chief mechanic. His car was of a different model, and he was waiting for a spare part. So the chief mechanic couldn't help him. The chauffeur had forgotten his overcoat. He had a terrible cold and a sore throat, which accounted for his hoarseness. The blankets were all right in the bunk, but to wear out of bed he had only his thin khaki. Marjorie gave him a woolen muffler.

While they were cooking dinner, the driver hooked batteries to the wireless and tapped on the Morse key for a while. That was the message we didn't get in Reggan. Nobody got it. He might as well have hooked his batteries to the can of sauerkraut they were cooking.

It was pretty swell, Marjorie says, to brush her teeth, to wash her hands and face, and best of all to get undressed and put on pajamas. She had one of the bus shelters all to herself, like a drawing-room in a Pullman car. With her blankets, her burnoose, and the blankets already there, she slept warm as toast.



And when she was awakened, in black night but with the dawn coming, by the ex-nightmare rapist, three days' growth of ugly beard and bloodshot eyes, he was now all clean-shaven and had put on a clean shirt and was bringing her a bowl of hot coffee, and said:

"I hope you slept well. I slept fine. How about the cigarettes? The other chauffeur hasn't got any either."

Marjorie says she had been being particularly friendly, particularly nice to him—partly in apology for her own vile mental sin against him—but without hypocrisy, she adds, because she was getting quite fond of him, in a way maternal toward him. So that he not only cadged her cigarettes, but took her as a confidante and said presently, when they were rolling north on the trail again in the cool, lovely desert dawn:

"I'm sure Estienne wants to see me. He wants to talk to me. And if it's what I think, I'll agree, of course, but I'll ask him first for a three months' vacation, and I'm sure he'll send me up by the line. That way I'll be in Oran before the end of the week—and you know it takes no time to go across to Marseilles, and then to Paris. My wife will be glad. Maybe she could come down to meet me at Marseilles."

And Marjorie told him, she says, how pleased she was too that it had all come out all right, and how nice it would be to see Wauthier and me and everybody again at Reggan, and to meet Estienne. And then it was noon

and they opened some more canned stuff and ate together in the front seat, and went on.

She climbed over the seats in the midday heat, she says, and slept a little on the floor of the truck with her head on a spare tire, and then climbed back beside the driver and felt around in her handbag for lip stick, powder, mirror. Then, she says, something bothered her, and she didn't know what it was. She had stopped looking at the trail, long hours before. They were on the trail. She thinks it was because she sensed that the driver was worried, bothered again. She looked at the trail. There were faint wheel-marks, but somehow it didn't look right. Sand blown over it, she told herself, but it didn't look that way. It looked faint from having been seldom used. She looked at the afternoon sun. It was high, to be sure, but it seemed setting too far south of west.

Pretty soon they came to slightly softer sand, easy going but soft enough for the trail mark to be clearly defined, and she saw that they were following the tracks of one lone car. Therefore this couldn't be the main trail. "But it must be all right," the driver said. "It must be simply a short cut where the trail bends. Fellows who know the trail often make short cuts like that and save a good many miles."

So they went on for an hour or so. It was blazing hot, getting toward two o'clock. The driver was hunched over, tired, driving mechanically but with the gas wide

open going at maximum speed, since the sand had again become a hard boulevard. The car going at that pace, with the rattling junk, extra tires, and tools in the back, made a lot of racket, she says, but she was tired too, and she thinks she must have dozed.

She heard no honking horn, nor apparently did the driver hear anything. The first thing she heard—she must have had her eyes closed if she was not actually dozing—was angry shouts. At their left, close, speeding beside them, was another motor truck, with Raymond Bauret out on the running-board, so close that his waving free arm almost touched them. He was shouting, cursing, and flushed.

They were bewildered. Both cars slowed, and stopped, almost touching. Bauret was in a rage. He said:

“You god-damned fool, in another five minutes I’d have started shooting at your back tires! I’ve been following you for two hours. Where the hell do you think you’re going? And at that rate of speed!”

“But the tracks?” protested Marjorie’s driver, almost in a whisper.

“Shut up!” shouted Bauret, and added more quietly, as if for himself though he still addressed the driver, “Some driver who knows the desert better than you ever will was making his own short cut across the Asedjred, to sleep out probably and then go on to In Salah. Why, you poor bastard, by night you’d have been in the Hogar.”

The driver hung his head. Bauret had never looked at Marjorie, had never addressed her, hadn't even said hello. She didn't say anything either. She was getting madder and madder at Bauret. She had grown fond of her driver, she says. She remembered all his consideration for her—and the blanket. He had done the best he could. And even if he had lost the way, he was somebody too; he was the chief mechanic.

All this happened in a good deal less than a minute, during which the other chauffeur in Bauret's car said, "*Merde!*" and lighted a cigarette.

"Anyway," snapped Bauret, "get your tools and your personal stuff out of that car quick. Transfer them. The spare parts for Bidon 5 are in this other car. You can fix that tonight, and then go back to Gao."

Her driver, Marjorie says, looked as if he was going to cry. He said, hesitating:

"But I'm sure Monsieur Estienne wants to see me personally."

"He does like hell!" said Bauret. "Snap into it. Be on your way!"

Marjorie had wanted to protest too. She remembered her driver's happy confidential hopes. But Bauret, she says, treated her as if she didn't exist. She was angry, but she began to feel guilty. She began to feel that he held her to blame too for having gotten lost—began to feel that she was to blame.

She moved over to the far corner of the seat when he got in to take the wheel, and stared straight ahead of her. He swung the car in a half-circle, took a casual squint at the sun, opened the throttle, and she, staring ahead, saw that they were now again following no tracks at all, rolling at full speed again across flat, hard desolation, this time entirely trackless. But Bauret could do things like that. He was like a red Indian. She says she wished perversely that he'd get lost too—but that she instinctively knew he wouldn't.

She had noticed, with surprise, that still out there in the middle of the desert he was bareheaded, sleek, manicured, still wearing his smart black silk pajamas, his bright, leather-embroidered sandals—nothing else—and she hoped he'd get cold.

Bauret was like that. He loved and also profoundly respected his dangerous mistress, the Sahara—took his own precautions that her smile would never change into a death's-head kiss for him—but always affected a slight, cynical contempt for her. Bauret seemed to know quite a lot about feminine psychology.

He presently said to Marjorie, with a disarming and deprecating grin, "Awfully sorry, you know, but discipline has to be maintained."

She says her thoughts ran in a feminine-cliché groove: "Well, I think you were perfectly horrid to my nice driver." But remembering that though Bauret understood

English perfectly he hadn't learned it out of copy books or polite romances, what she actually said was:

"You needn't have been so lousy about it."

"Well, you see," he replied, "what made me so mad was that your driver wasn't to blame at all. We were to blame. We should have let you wait, despite the hurry of Wauthier and Seabrook. We picked him wrong. He's the best mechanic we've got, but that doesn't make him a chauffeur. The mistake was ours, not his, but it would never do to let him feel that. That's why I rode him. That's why I was mad."

"Well, I suppose you blame me too for getting lost," said Marjorie.

"Not exactly," he said, "but I was irritated. You look fine though. You look as if you had enjoyed it."

Marjorie recounted the intimate details of this dialogue to me at Seville and Biarritz while we were still with Wauthier and the plane, on the way back. We all talked a lot about Bauret. Wauthier recounted other sayings of his, other anecdotes about him.

Marjorie says that during this conversation she had moved over closer on the seat toward Bauret, so as to hear better, and that after a while, he was driving, as sometimes happens, with one arm.

A while afterward, toward sundown, and after they had come into the main trail, he slowed up, stopped, and said, lapsing into his own language:

*"L'heure de l'apéritif"*—"Cocktail hour"—and produced a thermos bottle. They had cigarettes, and talked about mutual friends in Paris, and were on their way again in the sunset. I have never been over that particular sand waste except in an airplane, but any real desert, Arizona, Arabia, anywhere, is incredibly beautiful—and romantic—toward and after sunset.

The sun sets early in February in the Sahara. It was a long time after dark, several hours after, when they arrived in Reggan. Marjorie has never told me what they talked about—has never related their subsequent dialogues. But, as I mentioned somewhere else, apropos of something else, she often talks of going back to the Sahara.

# XIV

**R**EUNITED, happy, the three of us, in our familiar places, in our glass-aluminum cage, in the windowed breast of our beautiful white bird, with chocolate in the pocket of our Capitaine, hot coffee in the thermos bottle, and Marjorie's broken finger nails remanicked and pinked—we were in the air again, up from Bordj Estienne, with Georges Estienne, Bauret, and Abdullah waving good-by, up from the oasis of Reggan, up from the front door of this fantastic hotel de luxe in mid-Sahara—headed north (in the dawn as usual) on our way back to Paris and Montparnasse.

I've seen other airplanes start on long, and short, voyages at various hours of the day and night, but I've never known Wauthier to start anywhere except in the sunrise. From one angle, I still think, as intimated previously, that it's probably a personal neurosis of his. He's a little crazy, like all pilots. But perhaps in this dawn-fetishism he is only crazy like Napoleon or a fox. He always arrives.

This time, we were going to Oran, and since it takes only about eight or nine hours of normal continuous



flying, we'd get there normally between two and three o'clock in the early afternoon; Gilotte would have hardly finished lunch. And Marjorie could certainly have used advantageously a couple of hours more of sleep in her room with modern-art curtains and counterpanes.

Instead, at five o'clock in the morning we were a mile in the air, with the green oases turning into tiny, black, scattered spots behind us. Marjorie kept house. She rearranged the table, repacked the junk in the locker behind our armchairs, made sandwiches toward eight o'clock. Wauthier, happy to be flying again, turned and grinned at us over his shoulder every once in a while like a cat that had both feet in a saucer of cream.

The weather and wind were good. We felt they were going to keep on being good—which they did. I think we'd had our bellyful for the moment. We were glad to be going home. In the late morning, all the time a mile or more up and always on a level keel, we were over the edge of the Grand Erg Occidental—which is the picture-postcard Sahara, the cinema Sahara, that is, not hard flat desolation like the Tanesruft, but wavy hummocks, dunes, hills and hollows, loose sand waved by wind and weather, rounded bas-reliefs sculptured by the thumb of God. From a mile up some of it looked deliberate, like the work of Maillol or Brancusi. I had a little German camera with a special lens and took some shots. There's a torso as good as the best of Maillol, and the profile of a

woman with cloak and flowing hair. We guessed by roughly applied trigonometry that it would take a camel caravan about an hour to crawl like flies across her chin.

At Colomb-Bechar, where the Sahara ends and the railroad begins, we dropped down on the military field for gas. There was no Colonel this time with swagger stick and scarlet coat, but there was a dried-up little man with a cough whom Wauthier treated with more respect and admiration than he had the Colonel. It was Captain Paolacci, one of the pioneers of Sahara flying, one of the first to cross the desert in the air. He was recovering just now from a threatened attack of pneumonia contracted in night flight. He didn't say much. But he had heard the tale about Marjorie. He looked at her with admiration and curiosity. He said, "Madame, after that, you can say honestly that you're an old Saharan." It was an accolade. It was a nice way for her to say good-by, or perhaps only *au revoir*, to the desert.

We had some more sandwiches, and were again in the air, now back to the outskirts of mechanical civilization, now straddling the railroad. And, as is always the case on the fringes, we presently fell among thieves. The fighting Bedouin tribes are all right; the Tuaregs are all right; the cannibals are all right; they either kill you or offer you freely everything they've got, hospitality, friendship, loyalty. But always on the fringes, in seaports of Liberia and the Ivory Coast for instance, on the Syrian coast and

along its few railways, always along railroads or motor roads in bastard territories which are neither "the desert nor the sown," which are neither completely Europeanized nor pure native, you encounter corrupted natives—and alas, whites who have also been tainted with the corruption. First contacts (likewise slight and incomplete contacts, even though they last for generations) between our Bible-steam-engine-and-rum civilization and savage peoples, as in the case of the red Indians and blacks, or different peoples, as in the case of the Hindus and Moslems, always seem to result sadly in mutual degeneration and corruption. *Tout le monde devient crapule*. When you do the job completely, when you succeed in totally Europeanizing a locale, both groups get over the disease and become comparatively decent again, but the fringes are always rotten, disloyal, petty, cheaply crooked.

The town of Ain-Sefra, for instance, is neither in the Sahara nor in that lovely and on the whole happy garden of Algeria which the French have made into an integral part of the Mediterranean France. It is on the railroad, on the fringe, but it is in the bad lands, in neither the desert nor the sown. And the incident was characteristic.

Straddling the railroad, flying about a mile high over the bad lands, about a half-hour before coming to the neighborhood of Ain-Sefra Wauthier noticed that the dial on his dashboard which indicated pressure and circulation of lubricating oil had ceased functioning. This

meant one of two things: either the oil had actually stopped circulating, or the dial had simply gummed or broken. If merely the dial, it was of trivial importance, but if it was the oil itself, we'd burn out the engine in no time, perhaps even catch fire, which wouldn't be so sweet, since we were without parachutes in an inclosed limousine. The territory there is very ugly for forced landing, but Ain-Sefra was providentially just ahead of us, and while Ain-Sefra is not an aviation post, it has an excellent emergency landing-field.

We dropped lower over the little town, circled the field, and made an easy, perfect landing. It is a good field, but it has no guardian, no machine shop, no mechanics. So we got out our own tools, and began looking into the engine. As we were tinkering, an old motor truck arrived from the village, driven by a French-Algerian sort of fellow in overalls who looked as if he might be a mechanic, who pulled up beside the plane and came cordially toward us. In his truck were two big drums of gasoline, in case that was what we needed. His first friendly question was, "Out of gas?" In the truck also were so many blowzy French women of nondescript age and garb that they couldn't all have been his wife and daughters. They seemed to be more or less the whole white female population of Ain-Sefra who had come out to see the plane, to offer us comfort and sympathy if we were in trouble. They stood around.

Wauthier explained to the driver about the oil gage. "Ah, that's dangerous," he said. "In that case, I suppose you'll have to spend the night here. You can telegraph to Oran for a mechanic. Madame there has a *pension de famille* where you'll be very comfortable. We can take you back in the truck."

His solicitude was touching. "*Mille fois merci*"—"Thank you a thousand times," said Wauthier, "but we don't know yet. That's just what we are going to find out. Maybe you can help us. Are you a mechanic?"

"No, I'm the gasoline merchant," he said. "A thing like that is very dangerous. I can help you telegraph."

This time Wauthier thanked him *infiniment*, that is, an infinite number of times instead of merely a thousand, but turned his back on him and asked me to hand him another wrench. We discovered in less than a quarter of an hour that the oil was and had been circulating all the time. The gage had simply gotten gummed. No importance at all. We could be on our way immediately. In the meantime another car had come out from Ain-Sefra with a blond elderly French cop, a sort of military policeman, the village constable. He also was full of solicitude.

Wauthier thanked him also, and smilingly explained that everything was all right. We began picking up the tools, and getting ready to start. The cop and the gasoline merchant were whispering. Then the cop said:

"But it would be a very dangerous risk. You'd better stop here and telegraph to Oran."

"Look here," said Wauthier sharply, "what were you whispering about over there just now? What the devil is this all about anyway? Do you think I don't know my own plane? Or is it your wife who runs the boarding-house?"

The gasoline merchant had meantime cranked up his car as if to turn around, had made a short half-circle, and stopped again. I noticed that he had stopped awkwardly at a point where our left wing wouldn't clear him when we took off. He got out and came over to Wauthier and the cop.

"Sure you don't need any gas?" he said. "I brought you out a hundred liters."

"No," said Wauthier, completely out of patience, "I don't need anything, except for you to get your truck there out of the way so I can take off."

The cop and the merchant exchanged glances and then the cop became the spokesman:

"In that case, if you don't need anything, there's a fee of fifty francs—and of course, whatever else you choose to give. It's a local rule we have made. You see he's been put to the time and expense of coming out here to help you."

The merchant added (I quote him accurately on my word of honor, though the detail seems incredible):

"If you don't happen to have the money on you, you can pay me in gasoline, since you seem to have so much of that."

We looked at the truck there blocking our wing. We looked at each other. I still had one of the wrenches in my hand. I was a little bit wanting my Capitaine's permission. There are some things, trivial, yet for which the answer is either a smash in the face—or no answer at all. My Capitaine knew that the latter alternative was best. Without one word, he paid the money. Without one word, they clambered back into their cars and went away.

Our friend Gilotte, who thinks the Mosaic tooth-and-eye law is too mild, suggested a third answer when we told him about it that evening over the *apéritifs* in Oran; he suggested that it might be arranged to have them both quietly murdered by means that would appear accidental and consequently not involve a subsequent investigation. Gilotte is a noble fellow. In the time of the Medicis he'd have become a duke or a cardinal.

In this different century, he was a minor Mæcenas, a lesser Lorenzo, for the poets who write their epics and sonnets with gas and oil in the sky. He didn't own a plane, but he was a leading member and director of the Oran Aero Club, a flying fan, patron and protector of pilots.

So it came about naturally that we spent our last night in Africa with air-pilot friends of his and Wauthier's,

some military, others of the Aero-Postal. They accepted Marjorie and me casually, informally, with a sort of amiable indifference, as companions of our Capitaine. There is often a queer strain, a queer tone, an embarrassed reticence, among professional aviators in the company of nonflyers. It may simply be trade consciousness, specialist consciousness, such as a group of opera singers or painters displays in the presence of people who have no interest in music or painting. But I think there is a shade of something else added in the case of flyers. I think they know—these army aces and international long-flight fellows—that they are high adventurers, little sky-brothers of Ulysses and Columbus, and I suspect they have almost a poet's contempt for the human worms who merely crawl along the surface of the earth. But at the same time they have a protective fear against seeing themselves in such a light. So they call their planes taxis, zincs, busses, and pretend that their trade is as commonplace as that of chauffeurs and truck-drivers. One of themselves, a distinguished Aero-Postal aviator named Saint-Exupéry, had just published a book presenting the heroic, epic, poetic aspect of their calling. He wasn't there that night in person, but copies of his book had come down from Paris, and they were discussing it with considerable heat. It was called *Vol de Nuit*, had won the Prix Femina, and has been translated since, I believe, and published in England and America as *Night Flight*. His



fellow pilots all admitted that it was beautiful, which it is, but they seemed to have a sort of shamefacedness that one of their number should have written beautifully, poetically. It is a tale of the epic days of the founding of the Aero-Postal with Buenos Aires as the principal locale. It presents the psychological conflict and tragedy of the director general on the one hand, who sits safely on the ground among his maps, telephones, clocks, and wireless instruments: and on the other hand the young pilots whom he sends up, ruthlessly if need be, into high risk, if need be, to die if need be. Individual lives are nothing. Casey Jones is nothing. But the mails must go roaring through—from Patagonia to Paris. Saint-Exupéry's friends were arguing about it here in Africa, agreeing that it was too high-keyed, too high-pitched, too emotional. At the foot of the table, however, was a young pilot who insisted that it wasn't. He cited an episode, not from the novel, but from the actual early history of the line. It was a bus, he said, carrying both mail and passengers from Casablanca to Toulouse. It came down in flames, a forced landing, still burning. It turned partly over, and the pilot was holding the door open for his passengers to crawl through when the flames began to play upon his hands. When the last passenger had crawled through, the pilot's hands were two burned stumps. He was made a hero, naturally, pensioned generously, etc.,

but some years afterward he met his director general in a café, blocked his path, and said:

“Congratulations! You have made a world success of the Aero-Postal. But you have built it on the mutilated and dead bodies of your pilots. If you deny it as you stand there, I’ll smash your face with my two burned stumps.”

The director said sadly, “Do you think, then, it was so much easier for us others?”

The pilot who cited the episode insisted that *Vol de Nuit* was not overkeyed and that Saint-Exupéry had succeeded in showing that the “villain” of the piece was not the director but the line itself, life itself, duty, the mails which must go through. He made his point well. And they all agreed that it was just as tough—perhaps even tougher, since he had none of the fun or the adventure—for the director who sat down below with his maps, wireless, telephones, and sometimes tragic responsibilities.

Africa and the Mediterranean both smiled at us with fair winds and weather next morning when we took leave. We varied the course of our downward flight, slid west, crossed at the Straits of Gibraltar, to fly up over the whole of Spain from south to north, with Biarritz as our first French objective.

To learn the psychology, customs, habits, of a foreign

country, it is obviously better to cross it on foot with a knapsack, taking a year or two. Crossing the same country in a few hours two miles high, you haven't been in Spain at all, in the sense of having been among Spanish people. Your knowledge of their homes, bars, and restaurants, wines, arts, and cathedral doorways, is a blank zero. But take a country from a different angle, as being simply an expanse of the terrestrial globe, and I believe you can get a clearer idea of it topographically and geographically by flying over it once than you can get from living in it all your life.

(The only thing we learned about Spanish life, 1932—that was when we dropped down in Seville—is that if you want to eat Spanish food today without ordering it a week in advance or without being guests in a private old-fashioned home or in a peasant's farmhouse, or at a peasant's inn with laborers, you had better wait until you get back to Paris, or New York, or Shanghai or Soho. There are excellent restaurants in Greenwich Village, Harlem, West Twenty-third Street, owned and operated—including the cookstove—by Spanish families. If you are in Spain as a hurried tourist, whether by air or train or motor, and have the ambition to eat a Spanish meal, you'd better have patience and wait until you get back to New York. This isn't peculiar to Spain. The Syrian cooking on Washington Street is better, and more classic, than the Syrian cooking in Syria. The Armenian cook-

ing on Lexington Avenue, vaguely behind the Metropolitan skyscraper, is better than the cooking in Armenia.

(Coming back now to Seville, to eat and sleep there, we asked a charming Spanish commandant of air squadrons to direct us—he happened to have been entertained once by Wauthier and Wauthier's uniformed companions in Paris, and happened also by pure accident to be on the air field when we landed, but couldn't offer to be our host himself, since the Spanish revolution had left the Royal Flying Corps and everything else Royal (except the king, who was himself well heeled) without a nickel. . . . We went to the Hotel Bristol, which, despite its English name, is in the center of Seville and excessively swanky and Spanish. There were heroic portraits of Cervantes and Calderon, done in colored mosaic, in the lounge. The bar looked like the shrine of Notre-Dâme at Lourdes, except that enshrined in the center, illumined with electric candles, there was the immense head of a bull, horns, hide, glass eyes, and all, instead of Our Blessed Lady of the Immaculate Conception. It was a bull that had either been killed or raised by a nephew of the hotel-owner. The particular bull had put up a famous (losing, as always) fight in the Seville ring, but the maître d'hôtel couldn't remember whether the nephew of his proprietor had been the matador or the stock-raiser.

(It was all so Spanish that we asked, with confidence, for a Spanish dinner. The French maître d'hôtel smiled

and said, "Surely." In about ten minutes he was back. He didn't give a damn about two American tourists, but like all flunkeys, he had a desire to please uniformed and bemedaled army officers of whatever nationality. They might take him out some day and have him shot like Mata Hari. He explained with apologies. If we could stay over a day or two it could surely be arranged . . . but the chef in the kitchen was French and the cuisine was "*internationale*." They'd have to get a cook in, an old woman probably, and they'd have to buy special things in the market.)

(P.S. to this long parenthesis: We ate the French *cuisine internationale*, which, by the way, was excellent.)

At sunrise next morning we were two miles high, with human and culinary Spain, which we had surely judged too quickly and doubtless wrongly, sliding under us at one hundred and twenty miles an hour—but with all its purely geographical and topographical features perhaps more clearly defined in our eyes than they ever were in the better eyes of Charlemagne, Velásquez, Torquemada, Cervantes, El Greco, Goya, who were God-struck geniuses but had to stay on the ground, since Dædalus (not Stephen or his disreputable Irish father, but the father of Icarus) had mixed beeswax with feathers instead of mixing gasoline with vanadium steel.

We had flown, from Gibraltar north, over the green flat plains, semitropical, of the Guadalquivir, irrigated,

flowering. Capitaine wrote "Andalusia" on his knee pad, but it was difficult for a person brought up on English tradition to imagine that it was Spain at all. What we others, Anglo-Saxons, imagine Spain to be, is not flat green fields, well watered, irrigated. Spain to us others is red, bare hills with old castles and glaring towns. Far north of Seville, we came into it. We came into territories greenless, old red worn-out hills, old castles and glaring red-yellow fields and farms on slopes. It was the center of Spain, the heart of Spain. We flew low over Madrid, not stopping. Anybody who has been there for ten days can tell me more than I will ever know, unless I live in Madrid too, about the best restaurant, the mayor's wife, a street number, but I know more about its topographical-geographical layout (with a two-mile-high hurried once-over) than any gossip who has lived there worming for sixty years.

After about two hours more, Capitaine wrote on his pad "La Mancha," and then, grinning, wrote "Don Quixote."

We were flying over the traditional Spain now, the Spain of the painters and high romanticists, bare, red, yellow, castled, mystical, barren yet glowing with a holy light. . . .

We soon got further northward, into ice and snow. It was February, hardly past January, and snow had been falling in the plains. We went over blank, flat whiteness

long before we came in sight of the Pyrenees. They were quite a lot higher than we were. Wauthier, the prudent ace, was again straddling a railroad line. We were going to cross by the "divide." Even so, it was a hell of a lot higher than we were. It was an ice-snow barrier, which seemed to block the north, contacting with the clouds like a curtain.

Capitaine lay back gently in his seat, turned on more gas, opened the throttle wider, and we climbed.

He motioned and ordered, and I put his leather coat on him, and then we put on our leather coats, but our ankles and bare hands began to burn, and we wrapped our extremities in whatever we could find, and the altimeter said we were too much more than three miles high, and the thermometer said we were ten degrees below zero.

Going over the Pyrenees, on this return trip, I was more scared than I had ever been in the Sahara. Ice and snow, laid down at steep-mile angles . . . a forced landing would have been good night.

But we went over it, as easily as any other migratory birds do, or any human beings if by chance their skull has shaped itself in mother's womb like baby eagle—dropped down into sunshine and beauty over radiant Biarritz and were met on the landing-field by Monsieur Jean Laborde, devout Catholic president of the Biarritz Aero Club, with a big bouquet of pink roses for Marjorie. At the hotel there were a lot of telegrams, a Paris 'phone

call from our field-marshal-generalissimo, William Aspenwall Bradley, and in flesh and blood one of Wauthier's fiancées who had come all the way down from somewhere up north to spend the night with him.

He was up before dawn in spite of that. It was nice to be flying over France, to be flying back to Paris. That is, we said we were flying to Paris, and that is the way the various newspapers which Gilotte had saved to show us in Oran described it. "Paris-Timbuctoo and Return" was what they called it. So did we—the same phraseology which is generally used and accepted in headlines and conversation concerning more important flights than ours. Also, in conversation, by the casual business man who has begun to use the commercial air lines; he says, "Yes, I flew from Paris to London last week." Nobody thinks to contradict him, to say, "No, you didn't; you flew from an ugly little village called Le Bourget, which is quite a way outside Paris, to an uglier and bigger factory town called Croydon, which is even further away from London." I don't know why I thought to contradict myself about ourselves. It may have come from wondering how we really would get back to Paris—probably in the automobiles of friends. But it occurred to me suddenly that although airplanes were invented a long quarter of a century ago, no human being has ever flown to Paris—or to London, or to New York, or to any other important metropolis. For that matter, you can't even fly to Tim-



buctoo. You fly to Khabara, and arrive in Timbuctoo on horseback, or in the automobile of the cousin of the son-in-law of Père Yakouba. I wondered, apropos of that, whether the same thing hasn't happened up to now in the history of airplanes that happened in the history of automobiles.

I was about ten years old when I saw my first "horseless carriage." It was being driven up the main street of Westminster, Maryland, by Ollie Grimes's father, and "horseless carriage" was what it was. It had buggy wheels, and a buggy seat, and buggy lamps. It had everything that a buggy had except shafts and a horse and a whip socket. It had a little gasoline engine under the seat—but it took almost a decade for anybody to have the vision to see that it wasn't a horseless carriage, that it was a motor car; to begin changing its lines radically and giving it more power. But that isn't the point. Even after it had become a motor car, and a good deal longer than a decade after it was invented, it was still regarded as a toy of the rich and of special people. In the city of Augusta, Georgia, as late as 1905, there were only three motor cars, owned by Jake Phinizy, the leading millionaire, and the two leading doctors, Murphy and Lyle. But that isn't the point either. In 1908 or 1910, when a combination of great American newspapers formed a motor caravan to blaze the Lincoln Highway, to open a possible motor route between New York and Atlanta, it was an adven-

ture comparable to driving a car from the Cape to Cairo. Mud, broken bridges, broken axles, cars sunk to the hubs in dirt roads, detours, pioneering. It was, finally, a quarter of a century after the invention of the motor car that the world woke up to its universal significance and began spending almost more money, more taxpayers' money, on new sorts of roads for the cars to roll over than was spent in the manufacture of the cars themselves. The man who thought he'd never own a motor car, or never even ride regularly in somebody else's, bellyached to high heaven. But the governments of all civilized countries spent millions, billions, in new sorts of roads for motor cars to roll over, and now you can go from Atlanta to New York or to Frisco, or to any important city in Europe or America, in your own flivver or a public bus, with only rarely getting off the concrete and asphalt. It took a long time—but now everybody—farmers, day laborers, tramps, invalids, babies, and your eighty-year-old grandmother—enjoys it and profits by it. The motor car has revolutionized life—but only after billions were spent, not on motor cars, but on new sorts of roads for them to roll over.

Maybe airplanes are in the same situation today that good motor cars were in the period when they started blazing the Lincoln Highway. Planes, both private and commercial, are already built to be safe, comfortable, economical. Some don't cost any more to own, operate, or ride in with a ticket than the contrivances that crawl

like worms along the surface of the earth, on rails of steel or roads of asphalt. But these antiquated "devices" have the present advantages over the airplane that they arrive. They get there. If they're crawling on steel, they crawl into Grand Central, or Pennsylvania Station. If they are crawling on asphalt or concrete, they take you to your door, or to the door of a garage or bus station which is more or less next door.

The fastest airplanes on airways today without being pushed make an average safe speed of 170 miles an hour safely as against the fifty- or sixty-mile average snail-pace of the best trains and motor cars. But they can't arrive in any city. Unless you are going on long flights—to cross the Atlantic, go to Timbuctoo, or Moscow, or Indo-China—why bother?

Take the de-luxe and comfortable air service between Paris and London. Take it really. Buy your tickets and fly. It doesn't cost any more than the boat train, and you'll enjoy it. But take it simply for variety and pleasure, as you take a roller-coaster or a saddle horse in the park. If you take it from a different practical angle, time-saving, speed, it's a pious fraud. It takes—or would take if any human being had ever done it and landed—about two hours to fly from Paris to London. That would be really interesting from a practical angle. Instead, you go by bus, through ugly suburbs, over cobblestones, then

into country, for nearly an hour, to Le Bourget. You fly for two hours. You say you are flying to London—just as we said to ourselves, returning, that we were flying to Paris. But you land in Croydon, which is not even a legitimate suburb. Another bus ride of an hour. You've spent about as much time in a bus as you have in an airplane. What with one thing and another, it's taken you at least four hours. Why bother, except for the pleasant experience? For the same price, you could have taken the best boat train in the center of Paris, and arrived in the center of London in about six hours. The trains go at fifty or sixty miles an hour and the planes double that speed. But why bother? It takes you nearly as long.

While I am less familiar with details, I imagine it comes to about the same thing if you fly from Washington or Chicago to New York. You arrive in New York—in a pig's eye. You arrive at one field or another to-hell-and-back in New Jersey.

Yet airplanes are as well-made today, and as safe, and as comfortable, and as capable of being universally used, as flivvers, as busses, as railroad trains, as trucks which crawl like worms along the ground.

I don't know the answer. Some people think the helicopter and the giro will furnish a world-changing answer, but they are still in experimental stages. Nobody has yet landed, even experimentally, beside the geranium bed on

the roof garden of his skyscraper penthouse. But the airplane, on the contrary, has arrived. It hasn't yet arrived in Paris, London, or New York, or any city. But we have it with us. I suggest, mildly, that if a few billions were spent to put big, practical airdromes not in baseball fields and suburbs, but in the actual hearts of all principal cities, airplanes would quickly become as universally utilitarian and revolutionary as flivvers, busses, and railroad trains were in their day.

There is the Champs de Mars, there is Hyde Park, there is Central Park—and there are similar central clearings in all cities. But if these are sacrosanct to soldiers, sparrows, cops, and children of the rich and poor, I would mildly suggest that it would actually pay in dollars and cents to raze ten, or a hundred, city blocks of buildings in any prosperous city of the world to make room for a practicable airdrome. The big aerial machine ships, the military fields, the immense garages, could still remain out on Long Island, at Croydon, at Le Bourget. But trainloads of people and mail, tons of grapes and melons, book and grocery salesmen, as well as new Lindberghs crossing oceans and continents and your son coming down from Harvard or up from Johns Hopkins in his new aerial flivver, could actually fly to New York (or to any other city) and land there.

It might be worth doing. There is almost as much difference between one hundred and seventy miles an hour

and fifty as there used to be between a railroad and a post-chaise.

In the meantime we were approaching Paris, but since flying to cities is still a pious fraud, a catch phrase, a pipe dream, we would land at Le Bourget.















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